

BACK2LIFE PROJECT

★ LETTERS OF HOPE PENPAL PROGRAM ★

Connecting Lives, Restoring Hope. One Letter at a Time.

Communicating With Incarcerated Individuals

A Back2Life Project Guide for Supporters, Families, and Letter Writers

Purpose of This Guide

Back2Life Project exists to restore dignity, connection, and hope for incarcerated individuals, veterans, and their families. Communication – especially written communication – can be powerful, healing, and life-affirming.

It can also come with unique boundaries, risks, and rules that many people are unfamiliar with.

This guide is provided to help supporters communicate respectfully, safely, and responsibly, while protecting both the person writing and the person who is incarcerated. It is educational in nature and intended to support healthy, human-centered connections – not to discourage them.

..... Everyone deserves connection. Your story matters.

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1. Our Belief at Back2Life Project

We recognize that a person is more than their worst moment. A conviction does not define someone's entire identity, humanity, or capacity for growth.

Back2Life Project believes:

- People can change
- Accountability and dignity can coexist
- Meaningful connection matters
- Respect should never be conditional

Our role is to support safe, constructive communication while honoring the lived realities of incarceration.

2. No Assumptions, No Labels

We do not ask supporters to judge, investigate, or categorize people based on their convictions.

If you are communicating with someone who is incarcerated:

- Avoid assumptions about who they are or why they are incarcerated
- Understand that every story is complex
- Allow people to share at their own pace, if they choose

Curiosity is natural – interrogation is not.

3. Do Not Ask About Crimes

As a general rule, do not ask someone why they are incarcerated or about the details of their offense.

If an individual:

- Chooses to share part of their past, listen respectfully
- Never pressure them to disclose
- Avoid reacting with shock, judgment, or moral evaluation

Everyone's past is personal. Trust develops organically.

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4. Public Records and Respect

While incarceration records may be publicly accessible through Department of Corrections (DOC) websites, having access does not create entitlement.

If you independently learn information:

- Treat it as private
- Do not reference it unless explicitly invited
- Never weaponize it in conversation

Respect is not optional simply because information is available.

5. Writing and Mailing Letters

Mail is one of the most meaningful ways to stay connected.

When sending mail:

- Use the incarcerated person's full name
- Include their DOC or inmate ID number
- Follow facility-specific addressing rules
- Always include a return address

Mail that is improperly addressed may be delayed or rejected.

6. Mailroom Rules Matter

Every facility has strict mail regulations.

Common restrictions include:

- No glitter, stickers, or decorative elements
- No perfume, lipstick, or scented items
- No layered or pop-up cards
- Limited number of photographs (often 10 or fewer)
- No Polaroids
- Photos typically must be 4x6 inches or smaller

When in doubt, ask the incarcerated individual about their facility's rules before sending items.

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7. Ending Communication Respectfully

If you choose to stop communicating, that is your right.

The most respectful approach:

- Clearly and kindly state that you no longer wish to correspond
- Do not disappear without explanation if avoidable

If communication continues after a clear request:

- Mark envelopes “Return to Sender”
- Black out your address
- Contact the facility mailroom if necessary

Boundaries protect everyone.

8. Protecting Your Address and Privacy

If you are uncomfortable sharing your home address, consider:

- A PO Box
- Using an approved organization’s mailing address
- Using a trusted institution that allows mail forwarding

Never share personal information you are not comfortable being permanently known.

9. Be Patient With Response Times

Prison mail moves slowly.

Delays are normal due to:

- Mailroom screening
- Staffing shortages
- Facility lockdowns

If you do not receive a response right away, assume delay before interpreting silence.

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10. Never Discuss Prison Security

Security is a serious matter.

Do not:

- Joke about escape
- Ask about facility routines
- Discuss staff behavior or vulnerabilities
- Share rumors or speculation

Even casual comments can result in serious consequences for the incarcerated person and yourself.

11. Third-Party Messages Are Discouraged

Avoid acting as a messenger between incarcerated individuals and others.

Third-party communication:

- Risks privacy violations
- Increases misunderstanding
- Can put individuals at risk

Direct, approved communication is always the safest option.

12. Friendship First

Back2Life Project is not a dating service.

We strongly encourage:

- Starting with friendship
- Keeping communication grounded
- Avoiding emotional dependency or pressure

Healthy connection grows at a human pace. Anything rushed deserves pause.

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13. Financial Boundaries

Do not send:

- Money
- Gift cards
- Funds for commissary

While many incarcerated individuals lack resources, money can:

- Create unsafe dynamics
- Lead to unintended consequences
- Complicate boundaries for both parties

Providing emotional support is powerful on its own.

14. Scams and Caution

Most correspondence is genuine – but caution is still necessary.

Be alert if someone:

- Requests money
- Pushes urgency or secrecy
- Attempts to manipulate emotions

Back2Life Project cannot control individual behavior, but we encourage you to report concerns so we can protect the larger community.

15. Photos and Authenticity

Photos may not always represent the current appearance or identity of the incarcerated individual.

Be mindful that:

- Photos can be outdated
- Photos may include others
- Verification is limited

If authenticity matters to you, proceed thoughtfully and without confrontation.

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16. Sending Photos Safely

Before sending photos:

- Confirm they are allowed
- Avoid sexual, violent, or gang-related imagery
- Label photos with the recipient's name and ID number
- Follow size restrictions

When unsure, ask first.

17. Our Commitment

Back2Life Project is committed to:

- Human dignity
- Safe connection
- Honest communication
- Respect for boundaries
- Support without exploitation

We believe connection saves lives – when it is approached with care.

Final Note

Communication with incarcerated individuals can be meaningful, life-affirming, and deeply human. It also carries responsibility.

When in doubt:

- Choose respect
- Choose clarity
- Choose safety
- Choose kindness

That is how connection becomes healing.