

# Prison Letter Writing 101

*[Seek The Alternatives \(STA\)](#)*

*"[...] for someone behind bars, physical mail is often the only connection they have to the outside world. It's not just a piece of paper – it's a symbol of love, hope and connection."*

*– Melissa Ludin (formerly incarcerated person)*



The following article explores the topic of prison letter writing. For organizational purposes the text has been divided into three key parts: (1) *The importance of physical mail in prisons*, (2) *Physical mail in prisons and the harms of technological interventions* and (3) *A practical guide to prison letter writing*.

## **Part 1: The importance of physical mail in prisons**

On March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022, [Beyond Prisons](#) hosted a vital panel discussion consisting of formerly incarcerated people and a family member of a formerly incarcerated person to discuss the importance of physical mail in prisons. The following section is a summary of their personal experiences and insights.

According to Andre Pierce (formerly incarcerated person who spent 25-years caged in Connecticut State prisons), physical mail constitutes a form of human intimacy that generates a deep sense of comfort and a softness that is utterly absent from carceral spaces, which are often described as cold, hard and lonely. Pierce draws attention to the idea that physical mail in prisons enable people on both sides of the wall to share their unique personalities, which can be conveyed in one's physical writing style and expression. For Pierce, physical mail in prisons constitutes a spiritual engagement and grounding during a time of life in which everything has been taken away. For Pierce, the physical letters he received in prison, which date back to 1996, meant so much to him that he read and reread them time and time again. Pierce's experience led him to realize that prison forces you to adopt a hypermasculine demeanour, which is nothing more than a mask that people in cages adopt in order to survive. Pierce states that the power of physical letters in prisons lies in their ability to speak to and reaffirm a person's unique identity (versus your DIN or prisoner number). In the words of Pierce, physical mail in prisons "give you a sense of community."

According to Sergio Hyland (formerly incarcerated person who served 21-years in Pennsylvania), physical mail in prisons is priceless and something that everyone caged up looks forward to. In

the prison that Hyland served his sentence in physical mail was only given out once per day and in that specific moment of delivery, Hyland reflects, it felt as if time froze. In the words of Hyland, “To receive mail is to know someone loved you enough to sit down and write a letter to you.” On the other hand, Hyland points out that those who failed to get any physical mail felt deeply hurt. To put it succinctly, physical mail in prisons is indispensable. Similar to Andre Pierce’s experience (above), Hyland acknowledges that the power of physical mail revolves around the fact that you can read it over and over. Hyland observes, unfortunately, states such as Pennsylvania have recently banned physical mail in prisons under the rubric of eliminating the entry of contraband materials. Hyland adds, physical letters in prisons allowed him to maintain a strong relationship with his significant other and helped to dispel rumors that were circulating in the community. Hyland stresses that the implementation of new technologies such as virtual “visits,” which became more prominent in the so-called post-covid era, have morphed into a systematic attempt to take away what little human contact prisoners had with their family, friends and community. Point being, technological interactions of this nature can (and should) never replace the human connection that people feel when sitting face-to-face in real time. For Hyland, prison institutions and the guards who work there are like “unsupervised children of the state” who are never held accountable for their actions. Hyland maintains that nothing productive comes out of prisons and this is exactly why he identifies as an abolitionist.

According to Lawrence Posey (formerly incarcerated person with two children who currently resides in the Bronx in New York City), physical mail is all about mental health, wellness and rehabilitation. Posey states that people in cages are conscious of the time it takes to sit down and write a meaningful letter – that is, a form of expression and connection that is vital to one’s mental health. Based on Posey’s experience, prisons are *not* about rehabilitation at all, in fact, it is the opposite. Posey points out that if the system *truly* wanted people to heal and be productive members of society it would cease the systemic process of depriving people behind walls of everything that provides them with a sense of connection and meaning. From Posey’s perspective, people cannot heal and become productive members of society if the carceral system treats them like animals. Posey stresses that physical mail in prisons is the most private thing people have behind prison walls. According to Posey, stripping people of their privacy and implementing systems of hyper-surveillance is antithetical to reducing recidivism rates. In the words of Posey, “It doesn’t make sense.” While many may think that prisons exclusively punish people in captivity, Posey points out, “it’s our loved ones that really suffer.”

According to Monica Cosby (formerly incarcerated person that was locked up for 20-years in Illinois – a state in the Midwestern United States), physical mail is life-giving and life-sustaining. During Cosby’s time in prison, mail was a much more practical method of communicating with her daughter versus the use of prison phones which were too expensive. For Cosby, prisons are abusive, isolating, violent and controlling institutions that embody the inner logic of abusers. In contrast to stated correctional objectives pertaining to notions of rehabilitation, Cosby’s experiences and insights suggest that prisons are extremely harmful to the psyche and in actuality break communities and families apart. For Cosby, this is exactly “why we need to do better.”

According to Mychal Pagan (formerly incarcerated person that was locked up for 13-years), physical mail is like a “piece of art,” which can be kept and revisited throughout one’s life. Pagan draws attention to the meaning of hearing his name being called upon mail delivery. For Pagan, the verbalization of his name meant that someone recognized him as a human being (versus his assigned DIN or prisoner number). Pagan draws attention to the manner in which physical mail functioned like a gateway into the past. Put another way, physical mail reminded him of who he was prior to being caged. For Pagan, physical mail is a powerful “act of remembering.” Pagan reflects, when he received a piece of physical mail from his kids it created a sense of closeness that could never be duplicated through electronic means. Till this very day, one of Pagan’s sons still has the letters that he wrote and sent from prison, which is a testament to their overall value and meaning.

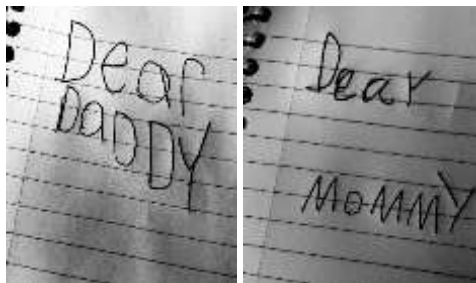
According to Maya Schenwar (sister of a formerly incarcerated sibling who lost their life upon release), physical mail in prisons could be used in many creative ways, which include the celebration of birthdays and holidays. In the words of Schenwar, mail in prison “was about the passage of time and sharing something meaningful in a tangible way.” Schenwar adds that the true beauty and power of physical mail in prisons lies in the fact that “You don’t know what the significance of the letter will be for the other person.” Beyond physical letters, Schenwar points out that face-to-face communication with her late sister would have saved her life. In the eyes of Schenwar, it was systemic surveillance and the generation of self-censorship that incapacitated her sister’s ability to engage in meaningful dialogue pertaining to what she needed in order to survive after she was released from prison. Schenwar points out that the harm of virtual “visits” lies in the fact that everything is recorded, and nothing is kept private. The harm of such technological practice gives rise to superficial interactions, and ultimately, the suppression of inner feelings and the articulation of human needs to those who *truly* care. Till this day, Schenwar maintains that the criminal punishment system played a role in the preventable death of her sister. Without her late sister by her side, Schenwar states that the physical mail they shared with each other provides her with an ongoing spiritual connection.

In addition to [Beyond Prisons](#) panel discussion pertaining to the importance of physical mail, [Ludin](#) (2024) (formerly incarcerated person) states, “During my time in prison, receiving physical letters from loved ones and friends was a lifeline. Holding a letter in my hands and knowing that it had been written, touched, and sent with care by someone who believed in me gave me a sense of connection that nothing else in that environment could provide.” Similarly, [David Campbell](#) (2023) (formerly incarcerated prisoner at Rikers Island in New York City) states, “When you are incarcerated, a physical letter is a small marvel, a message in a bottle, a reminder of who you are, where you came from, who still cares about you, and why you should stay out of trouble and come home soon.”

Similar to those on the [Beyond Prisons](#) panel discussion, [Ludin](#) reflects, the seemingly routine act of opening an envelop with your hands was in fact “deeply grounding.” [Campbell](#) adds, “There is something about the physicality of paper that matters. When you’re a prisoner starved for stimuli, your senses are heightened, and these distinctions are so real they leap out of the envelop at you.”

As discussed by [Ludin](#), “I could hold onto those letters, reread them when I felt lost, and remind myself that someone there cared about me. The weight of the paper and the handwriting on the page carried the presence of the person who had sent it.” For [Ludin](#), physical mail was a meaningful reminder that she was *not* disregarded. In the words of [Ludin](#), “Those letters gave me something to hold onto, literally and emotionally. They helped me stay hopeful in an environment designed to strip away my sense of self and, for me, being a woman.” For [Ludin](#), the importance of physical mail in prisons revolves around three vital psychological and emotional aspects: *emotional connection, mental health benefits and motivation*. [Ludin](#) is clear, if rehabilitation is truly a priority, we need to understand the relationship between healing and strong connections with those beyond the wall. As research points out, “Family and community support [*not prisons*] are proven to reduce recidivism, helping people reintegrate into the community after release” ([Ludin, 2024](#)).

*“Paper mail is one of the few things that keeps prisoners feeling human.”*  
– David Campbell (formerly incarcerated prisoner at Rikers Island in New York City)



## **PART 2: Physical mail in prisons and the harms of technological interventions**

For all the reasons and insights stated above by formerly incarcerated people, we must resist the implementation of mail-scanner policies and other technological interventions that work towards abolishing or locking up original copies of physical mail and pictures. While many of the cases discussed above deal with prisons in the United States of America, [Colley](#) (2018) points out that Nova Scotia jails have implemented a system of logging and scanning all in-coming mail. As discussed by [Colley](#), “Inmates receive the photocopy version of their mail, while the original is stored in their personal file and handed over to them upon release.” While the justifications for such directive revolves around eliminating contraband and the redundant notion of enhanced “safety,” [Ludin](#) (2024) argues that these issues can be easily addressed through the application of three specific measures: *screening technology, staff training and community education* – all of which would free up the deeply personal and meaningful originals. As suggested by defence lawyer Jim O’Neil ([as cited in Colley](#)), these types of directives go well beyond the original punishment of removing a person’s liberty. As observed by Lawrence Posey and Maya Schenwar (above), hyper-surveillance only punishes loved ones and leads to self-censorship which gives rise to shallow dialogue and greater levels of inner tension and frustration. Similarly, O’Neil ([as quoted in Colley, 2018: para. 17](#)) states, “It means

that suddenly people aren't going to want to be open in their communications, so that letters from family are going to have to be carefully worded." Finally, [Campbell](#) (2023) warns, altering physical mail in prisons "indisputably leave[s] prisoners angry, upset and distressed. Assault rates are documented to rise when in-person visits are banned in jails and prisons, and I can confirm firsthand that when services are cut, tempers flare."

*"It's not just a piece of paper – it's a symbol of love, hope and connection."  
– Mellisa Ludin (formerly incarcerated person).*

### **PART 3: A practical guide to prison letter writing**

According to [PASAN](#) (n.d.), a community-based Harm Reduction/HIV/HCV organization in Toronto, Canada, there are a few things a person should consider prior to engaging in the prison letter writing process. Firstly, it is important to reflect and understand *why* you are interested in writing people that have been incarcerated? This may take some time and deeper reflection, so be patient with yourself. Once you work through the *why* question you will gain a clearer understanding of your personal feelings and intentions, which will be constructive for you as well as your relationship with people that have been incarcerated. As you engage in this self-reflective process try to remember everyone writes for different reasons. As mentioned by [PASAN](#), "There are no wrong reasons to get involved in letter writing, it is an essential support for people inside" (2).

Potential writers should also reflect on the amount of time they can realistically commit as this will assist in the development of thoughtful responses. Ultimately, your level of commitment should be communicated in a clear manner to the person that you are writing as a means of preventing the all too familiar dynamic of people constantly coming and going in the institutionalized lives of prisoners. In the words of [PASAN](#), "The most important thing for the well being of your pen pal is being very clear about what you are able to give and following through with that" (3). Put simply, consistency and clarity is key as "Small things for us on the outside can be a very big deal for someone on the inside whose life is entirely regimented and scheduled" ([PASAN, n.d.: 6](#)). If you are unable to follow through with a specific commitment have a backup plan in order to prevent disappointment, disengagement and frustration. In essence, communicate, anticipate and set up your personal boundaries and intentions from the start.

Will you be writing as an individual or from an organizational standpoint? Your answer to this question is important because it may change the trajectory, focus and tone of your correspondence. As mentioned by [PASAN](#), "take some time to consider if you are writing as a professional supporter or advocate and what that means for your relationship with a prisoner, versus writing as an individual" (4). Either way, your correspondence is important as it interrupts the isolation and loneliness that people experience behind prison walls.

What can you expect? According to [PASAN](#), letter writing can be an emotionally challenging process at times. For instance, you might read about an unjust situation that involves neglect,

racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, violence and/or discrimination. In other instances, you might run across language that you do not understand and feel some confusion about. Having such an awareness is important as it will enable you to prepare and engage with grounding exercises that work for you (e.g., walking, running, Yoga, mediation, etc.). In some cases, it might be important for you to reach out to a support network capable of providing space, comfort and understanding. As a proactive move, [PASAN](#) recommends that potential writers organize a list of supports prior to committing to the letter writing process. Given that we are all different people with varying life experiences, those supports will be unique to you, and ideally, provide you with what you need to remain centred. As discussed by [PASAN](#), “Some ideas are gathering a group of people who are interested in letter writing, or even one other person who you trust who you can talk through things with” (5).

When it comes to prison letter writing it is important to remember that there is a lot of power in feeling heard versus trying to fix things ([PASAN, n.d.](#)). As discussed by [PASAN](#), there is a chance you will read about things that will result in a deep sense of anger, sadness and/or frustration; however, do not underestimate the power of your correspondence and ability to validate what they are going through. The trust that you build with a person behind bars may give rise to a deeper sense of openness, which is good thing. As you may know, at times, everyone needs to vent! In the words of [PASAN](#), “Venting is a very helpful practice, but it may also be threatening to a prisoner’s personal sense of security. Your letters give them room to let go of painful or challenging experiences, or simply the day-to-day difficulties of life in prison” (9). Nevertheless, if a prisoner shares something with you that seems doable, consider making contact with an organization in your community capable of taking some vital steps ([PASAN](#)).

When it comes to the question of money transfers, [PASAN](#) points out, “People inside are often from backgrounds of extreme intergeneration poverty, which is a large part of the reason they are susceptible to incarceration” (8). Point being, requests for funds might come up and this is a perfectly reasonable request given that the prison system “promotes scarcity as a method of control” ([PASAN, n.d.: 7](#)). Ultimately, the question of money transfers is in your hands. Either way, it is important to be clear about your intentions and levels of interaction from the start. As mentioned by [PASAN](#), “Saying no will not damage your correspondence relationship, being unclear or waffling might” (8).

When it comes to sharing your mailing address with a person behind bars, it is an issue of comfortability. Ultimately, this is not a barrier to prison letter writing as you have different options. For instance, if you decide not to share your personal address you can send and receive mail through a willing community organization, a community mailbox service or a rental PO box from a nearby post office ([PASAN](#)). Remember, it is a personal decision based on comfortability versus a barrier to prison letter writing.

When it comes to physical mail delivery it is important to know that mail may be screened for contraband materials, inappropriate content or anything that might be considered a security risk ([PASAN](#)). Some of the items that would be deemed inadmissible include tape, glue, glitter, staples, graphic images, sexual content ([PASAN](#)) as well as large packages, books, magazines and

food ([Mitchell, n.d.](#)). As mentioned by [Mitchell](#), “Senders need to also be careful about sending letters saturated with perfume or other odours, or letters that have lipstick kisses or other biohazards on them. These will not be delivered to the recipient, and they will instead be sealed and placed in the recipient’s property.” With respect to the definition of contraband, [PASAN](#) maintains that it is kept intentionally vague as a means of exercising greater institutional control over those held in captivity. In the words of [PASAN](#), it is “always a good idea to re-read your letter before mailing it to double check you haven’t said anything that would lead to institutional suspicion. Sometimes this isn’t obvious and it’s easy to make a mistake. If the person you are writing to mentions this to you, don’t be overly apologetic, just move forward” (10).

In the end, it is important to remember, while we might not be able to change a person’s immediate situation, we can always “be decent and supportive human beings” ([PASAN, n.d.: 11](#)). As mentioned by [PASAN](#), “We often take for granted the spectrum of supportive relationships that exist on the outside, yet folks inside may never meet someone who will give them genuine care and dignity” (11). Reality is, you may be the first!

At this point, if you feel ready to make a commitment to prison letter writing please consider reaching out to one of the following organizations for next steps: *PASAN* at <https://pasan.org/about> or *Write On!* at <https://writeonprisoners.wixsite.com/writeon/contact-volunteer>.

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