

When a Loved One Goes to Prison: Daunting Questions Families Want to Ask

by [the Rev. Dr. Sandra S. Jenkins](#)

I want to visit my son/daughter, but I am unsure of the rules. What can I do?

Your loved one is contained in a cultural system embedded with rules and regulations that vary from state to state. The correctional system sometimes feels as punishing to families of inmates as it is to the inmates themselves. To get on a visitor's list, you are required to fill out forms and provide a lot of information. Contacting the chaplain's office of the particular prison is often the best way to start.

You can also contact the Kairos Ministry in your area. Start by searching for Kairos Prison Ministry International (KPMI) at <http://kpmifoundation.org/index.php>. Kairos can provide you with contact information and explain how to proceed, simplifying the process for you and clarifying procedures.

Submit your application to the proper authorizing body, which can vary from prison to prison. Make sure you fill out all information accurately because providing false information can delay the processing of your request.

Be prepared for delays and slow processing, but persevere in spite of them. Certain restrictions, such as the number of visitors allowed, the times allotted for visits, and special rules may seem like difficult hurdles to overcome. In addition, if you already serve as a volunteer in a prison, you may not be allowed to visit particular inmates. The prison chaplain may be able to help with some issues. Be aware that you may be subject to searches, possibly having to undress (in a private location and in front of a same sex officer), and you can expect to be under very strict surveillance.

What type of ID do I need to get in for a visit?

You can use any of the following forms of photo ID, but always check with the prison for the particular type of ID required:

- A driver's license (from any state)
- A Department of Motor Vehicles identification card (from any state)
- An armed forces identification card
- A United States Department of Justice Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) identification card
- A United States passport with photo or a foreign passport
- Foreign consulate documentation may also be acceptable in some locations

My Loved One seems to have been in trouble most of his life and now is in deeper than ever. Where can I get help?

Kairos Prison Ministry International (KPMI) offers various kinds of help, including retreat weekends for the family members of inmates, providing a support system for what may seem to be the bleakest moments of their lives. Ongoing support groups after these retreats and other local support groups provide opportunities to talk with others struggling with similar concerns. KPMI also offers specific supports related to your unique needs. Don't wait until you are overwhelmed before contacting them.

Local churches may be of help. Reach out to pastors, especially those who are involved in prison ministry.

Read books, articles, and other sources to understand everything you can about prison and its impact.

Attend lectures on criminal justice at universities or colleges. Talk with the professors and ask them your questions.

How can we learn prison language and better understand the prison experience?

To better understand prison language and the prison experience, read books written by former prisoners. K.C. Carceral's *[Behind a Convict's Eyes](#)* (Kansas City, MS: Cengage Learning, 2003) clarifies the language. Ralph Reagan's *[Fallen, Felon, and Finally Faith](#)* (NY: Miracle of 4th Street Press, 2010) shares the author's salvation experience behind bars. There are dozens more in which former inmates explain how they became involved in crime, what prison is/was like, and how they stopped returning there again and again.

Prisoner writings and devotional materials reveal the personal challenges faced by those who are affected - or "layered" - by multiple issues: family dysfunction; school failure; long-term sexual abuse; alcohol, drug, and sexual addictions; and physical violence. These writings also reveal the growth and transformation that may take place when prisoners receive effective long-term treatment and group support. *[Prisoner to Prisoner](#)* is good example. Although these tragic stories, often told in strong language, may be difficult to read, they are filled with incredible accounts of people facing and sometimes overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds. They also reflect the difference that can be made when prisoners receive appropriate care.

My loved one is being moved to a different facility, but no one will tell me where. What can I do?

During transport, information is sometimes unavailable for security reasons. Start by calling the warden's secretary at the prison your loved one is leaving or by searching online for your state's inmate locator site.

If, after a week or so, you still have no information, contact the head office of your state's Department of Corrections.

They won't let me in to see my loved one. What is going on?

During intake, your loved one may be held in a segregated area and may be ineligible for visits. The processing of inmates, which must take place before they are placed with the general population, may take time. Sometimes, during the early days of incarceration, inmates are required to earn points for visits and other privileges.

Visitors must be cleared ahead of time. If you have a police record, even just a traffic violation, your clearance may be delayed. If you have had a drug-related arrest, you may need to consult with an attorney, a local court clerk, or the prison chaplain for assistance.

Your loved one, depending on the severity of the crime and his or her classification, may not be entitled to contact visits. Non-contact visits require more processing time.

Some prisons allow conjugal visits; however, your loved one will need to earn privileges for them. To find out more, look for a visitor's handbook on the prison website or call the prison and ask how to get one.

Even if your loved one has earned sufficient privilege points for a visit, privileges may be revoked and visits curtailed because of disciplinary action.

Certain prisons allow for family visits lasting up to 40 hours or even longer. Some prisoners, such as those on Death Row, those serving life sentences, sex offenders, or those under disciplinary action may not be eligible.

Visits are sometimes prohibited if a prisoner has medical restrictions or has committed certain types of crimes. They may also be prohibited during work or school hours. During lock downs, of course, the prison does not allow anyone, including visitors, in or out. When in doubt, call the authority at the prison in charge of visitation or ask the chaplain to guide you to the right person.

Keep a patient heart. Dealing with prison policies and rhetoric can be challenging and frustrating at times, not only for you and your loved one, but for the prison staff as well.

General Rules for Entering Prisons

Visitors need to follow certain restrictions and protocols, including rules about what to wear. In addition to the list below, consult the prison you plan to visit for more specifics.

Do not wear clothing that resembles what prisoners wear. Many prisons issue orange uniforms, but since colors are specific to each prison, check in the visitor's handbook (ask the chaplain if you do not already have one.) If visiting a women's prison, do not wear dresses that resemble the prisoners' muumuus.

Do not wear clothing that resembles what custodial staff wear.

Do not wear any item that will set off a metal detector and cannot be taken off, such as an underwire bra or clothing with metal buttons.

Do not wear camouflage unless your identification shows that you are active or reserve military personnel.

Dress conservatively and modestly. The following are prohibited in almost every prison across the US:

- Strapless, sheer, or transparent clothing; halter or bare midriff tops;
- Skirts, dresses, or shorts that expose more than two inches above the knee;
- Clothing that exposes the breast, genitalia, or buttocks area;
- Very tight, form-fitting attire (the definition of "very tight" may vary among officers);
- Wigs, hairpieces, extensions, or other headpieces (except for medical reasons, which must receive prior approval);
- Hats or gloves, except with prior approval or in inclement weather;
- Open toe or shower shoes.

Although everyone must clear the metal detector, children under 36 inches (typically) are not subject to the restrictions related to colors or types of clothing.

In most prisons, all children under the age of 18 must be accompanied by an adult.

Final Thoughts

Prisons sometimes have their own local rules regarding unacceptable attire, such as excess jewelry (which may trip alarms), layered outfits, shoes without straps around the heel, and so on. Always check with the institution that you will visit and, if necessary, call ahead to avoid being turned away at the door.

Most prisons have a visitor center that will lend you clean used clothing if what you wear is rejected by staff; however, do not count on that. It is better to phone ahead, if you are in doubt, or bring an extra set of clothing in the car in case you need to change. If the correctional officer tells you that your clothing is unacceptable, it is best to comply without argument. If you really believe your clothing is in compliance, however, you may ask to speak with the volunteer coordinator or lieutenant/captain for security, who will make the final decision about your attire.

Please also see:

- [When I was in prison...](#)
- [Six Rules of Thumb for Prison Ministry: Advice for Pastors and Ministry Leaders](#)

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[http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/when-a-loved-one-goes-to-prison-daunting-questions-families-want-](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/when-a-loved-one-goes-to-prison-daunting-questions-families-want-to-ask)

to-ask  Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.
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