



PrisonCare.org Christmas Care

Ideas for Connecting with Prisons During the Holidays

The end of the calendar year is a tougher-than-usual time inside a prison.

For residents:

- Those with loving families are missing them in extra measure.
- Those without loving families are feeling more alone and unloved than ever.
- Those with long sentences are reminded of their years as they pass this mile marker.
- Those with little time left are reminded of how unprepared they feel to re-enter society.
- Those who are feeling emotionally stable have to carry extra weight for their struggling friends.
- Those who are feeling shaky fear asking for help, unwilling to make things worse for friends.
- Those with a desire to send gifts to loved ones have no way to do so.

For staff:

- Most will work shifts that interfere with family and community celebration on the outside.
- Most tensions run higher than usual in the facility, and there are more incidents to resolve.
- Requests from residents for special privileges are unique to the season; the call for constant decision-making (what to allow, what to refuse, how to make the wisest choices) is escalated.
- Seeing the pain in those residents who **have** established good rapport with staff can be heavy.

How can we help from the outside?

- ☆ **Pray.** Simply remember the prison neighborhood as a whole before the Lord if you don't know specific prayer needs. Post the above list of common holiday needs somewhere you will see it often to remind you to lift them up.
- ☆ **Cards.** Send as many cards as you can. Send FUNNY cards; many residents need a belly-laugh even more than a poetic reminder of God's love for them. Follow best practices so your cards make it to the residents: NO stickers of any kind, even return address labels or pretty seals on the back of the envelope. NO glitter, ribbon, glue-ons, or anything musical in the card itself. Include a hand-written note; a line or two means a lot even when you are writing to someone you do not yet know. **See below for some ideas for personal notes to include.**
- ☆ **Drawings.** Keep them simple, done in pencil, pen and/or marker (crayon is not allowed in some facilities), and don't add any glue, glitter, or the like. Send a drawing of a Christmas tree, a decorated package, a nativity. Santa, a snowman. If you have any artistic ability, or if you can print off clip-art online and color it with colored pencils, your time and hands-on effort in spreading cheer means a lot to a resident in an undecorated cell.

- ☆ **Photographs.** If you have a relationship established with a resident pen pal, maybe Christmas is the time to send a picture of yourself, you and your spouse, your pet, or your decorated tree or holiday table. Captions speak volumes: e.g., a photo close up of an ornament on your tree you have dedicated to that resident as a loving prayer reminder, "This is the ornament on our tree for YOU. You are not forgotten this Christmas, friend!" Remember to stick to 4x6 prints.
- ☆ **Postcards.** Flikshop.com is a great option this time of year! Receiving a picture postcard instead of a traditional card is a fun surprise. Delivery time will be slower than other times of the year, so plan ahead. It may take two weeks for a resident to receive a Flikshop postcard during December. The cost is less than \$1 for each postcard.
- ☆ **Gifts.** Sending presents is impossible in most facilities, BUT...if you get creative, you can make a small gift and mail it to a resident. For example, enclose a few half-sheets of paper, folded. On the outside, write, "Open when you need a chuckle." On the inside, write a dumb joke. On another, write, "Open when you feel lonely." On the inside, draw a heart and write a note to remind them of their value to you. On another, write, "Open when you are grumpy." On the inside, write a compassionate note encouraging them to connect to someone else in the facility with kindness. Kindness combats grumpiness! Remember to not seal any of them (no tape, no sealed envelopes, no staples). Fold the papers only. Mail room staff must be able to preview every line. This little pile of gifts to open when they choose to extends the sense of being remembered and valued beyond one day.
- ☆ **Angel Tree.** Contact PrisonFellowship.org to volunteer with Angel Tree to provide gifts and support to the families of incarcerated people this holiday season.

Don't forget to send Season's Greetings to the Warden of the prison you care for!

- ★ Thank them for spinning the many plates it takes to keep the facility running and safe.
- ★ Recognize their personal hard work and sacrifice, also ask them to pass along your gratitude to their staff.
- ★ If you know stories about any individual staffer who is doing good things in the life of residents you know, applaud them to their boss. Any time you have a chance to tell the warden you have heard good things about staffers from the residents, it means a lot!
- ★ If you are a praying person, tell the warden you pray regularly for the **safety** of everyone at their facility, for residents to do the hard work they must do to experience **rehabilitation**, and for creative opportunities for incarcerated people to make **true restitution** to their victims and to society in ways that will be good for everyone harmed by their crime.
- ★ Wish them meaningful time with people they love over the holidays and a renewed enthusiasm for their important work as they begin another year.

A final thought: allow your efforts to be gifts from a generous heart.

Don't expect to hear back from anyone behind the walls. This time of year often sees an increase in depression, and residents simply don't have what it takes to write back to you. That doesn't mean your card, letter, drawing, or photo didn't make a difference. Understand the struggle they face. Give without expecting anything in return. This is love in action.

What to write??

Here are some ideas to help you add a personal note to your cards.

- We haven't met, but you are on my heart...you are not forgotten!
- Is it random to get a card from me when you don't know me? Just embrace the weirdness and smile!
- Our lives have crossed paths in an unusual way, but that doesn't diminish how much you matter to me! Hang in there if some days are extra-tough.
- You matter. You matter. You matter. (Just in case you needed a reminder.)
- The world is a better place because you are in it.
- This is not the end of your story. Don't give up hope.
- I imagine the holidays can be hard. You are remembered with compassion at my house, friend!
- Look for the joy. Look for the kindness. If you can't find it, make some and share it. You can do this. Praying for you!