



# Starting a New PrisonCare Compassion Team



## Starting a New PrisonCare Compassion Team *from 30,000 feet up!*

*An overview of how this process can happen*

Choose a prison to “adopt”

Write a letter to the Chaplain, and explain very briefly that your PrisonCare Compassion Team has “adopted” their facility, and you’d like to begin corresponding with a couple of residents who are working hard on themselves and could use an encourager. Send a letter to the Warden, as well, thanking them for doing a difficult job well, and telling them that you have adopted their facility in an effort to raise awareness on the outside of the unique challenges faced by those behind the fence. Consider likening their prison to a hospital — an institution that is necessary to our society and serving the public interest, but one which does not typically get support from the public like a hospital does. Be sure to include the [PrisonCare.org](http://PrisonCare.org) website address so they can check out the mission. It can be hard to gain trust, and your team’s affiliation with PrisonCare, Inc. makes your mission clear.

Learn the rules for sending mail to your prison; the rules vary greatly from one state to another, from state to federal to private prisons, and even from one facility to another within the same system. You can find this information pretty easily on the internet.

Begin with a simple “Hello!” letter to a couple of inmates whose names and DOC numbers you have gotten from the Chaplain or someone else on the inside. Keep it shallow; the getting-to-know-you stage of the relationship is awkward for everyone.

Once you have begun to build a good penpal encourager relationship with a couple of residents, ask them to share your address with friends at the prison who might enjoy having a new penpal encourager. Keep weaving virtues-based language into your letters. Remember that you are encouraging individuals to not only work with hope toward personal goals, but also to spread that encouragement to others, and reduce the “us vs. them” animosity between residents and COs.

Track your correspondence with each penpal, so that you can keep it personal, remembering goals they are working toward, struggles they have expressed, interests unique to them, etc. It quickly becomes difficult to remember what you have written to whom, so consider keeping a copy of each letter you write.

Make note of staff members whose names are mentioned; having them in your mind as real people, individuals with many of the same struggles as the inmates, will guide your letters to your penpal. Look for ways to ask about the well-being of staffers, subtly humanizing the COs in the minds of the inmates.

As you build a team of penpal encouragers, create a “Welcome to the Neighborhood!” packet that you can give to newly interested folks. In the packet, include basic information about your prison, a photo of the facility, pictures of all the inmates to whom you are writing (you can find their mug shots on the state DOC website), and pictures of any of the staff you can find. Having pictures of the individual people is vital to developing a truly relational approach. Gather once a month if you can, either in person, or virtually, to share stories from inside, prayer concerns (for faith based groups), and plans for staff appreciation initiatives, or expanded outreach to inmates.

Consider establishing an Art Exchange to offer to inmates who are artistic and would like to connect with an encourager on the outside, but who are not letter-writers. Sending small pieces of original art to a resident, and then receiving a piece of their art in exchange is a powerful connection point. Keep in mind that art you create may well be photocopied in the mail room, and your friend on the inside may only receive the photocopy. Learn what you can about the restrictions on incoming mail — many facilities allow only pen and regular paper. Things like paint, crayon, glue, etc. are almost always against the rules.

If the Chaplain seems interested in PrisonCare, ask if they can help you figure out a way to host a CO appreciation event. The first week of May each year is National Correctional Officer Appreciation Week, so that can be a good time to send thank you cards (perhaps with a \$5 gift card enclosed) to each CO in the facility. Holidays also provide a good opportunity for sending a catered meal in to the staff room to feed the COs who have to work on Thanksgiving or Christmas Day. Rules vary greatly from one prison to another, and you will need the help of someone like the Chaplain, the Warden, or an Assistant/Deputy Warden to navigate the system.

*Yes, this sounds like a lot, but we hope it inspires you to see how much one small team can actually do.*

*This document was created to help global thinkers wrap their minds around the idea of a Compassion Team before they begin building one.*

*If you find this “30,000 feet up” view to be overwhelming, please access our more detailed, bite-sized pieces of how-to (always-free) PDF resources!*

*And thanks for caring!*