

Maintaining Relationships While Incarcerated

Our Jails Are Ages Behind The Rest Of The World

By Matthew Hattley

The New York State Department of Corrections (DOCCS) promulgates the "strengthening" of family ties. However, the rules and regulations of the department seem to stifle and smother the relationships necessary to transition back into society successfully. Rare is the case where an ex-offender returns home without any healthy ties, who does not re-offend. A strong, healthy support system is essential if one expects to reenter society as a productive citizen. Yet, DOCCS has imposed and strictly enforces restrictions that help to hinder healthy relationships.

Maintaining relationships with my family and friends while incarcerated is no easy task; it's literally a full time job. I have been up against various obstacles from day one, especially since I'm from Queens, New York City. After receiving my sentence of twenty-five years to life, I was uprooted from my community and relocated seventy miles upstate.

While incarcerated there are only three means of keeping open lines of communication with the outside world. 1. Telephone calls. 2. Correspondence, and 3. Visits. For security purposes, all three have stipulations attached. It's a daily reminder that we prisoners are no longer in control of our own lives — the prison staff are.

Telephone Calls: all calls are made "collect" and cost about \$1.45 per half hour. They are subject to random electronic monitoring. At any given time a prison employee may be listening and/or recording our conversation. So privacy no longer exists. Before anyone can accept our calls, a pre-paid account must first be established with our current service provider — Value Added Communications (VAC). The recipient must contact VAC, we are no longer permitted to do so from here.

Furthermore, we are only allowed 15 telephone numbers on our approved phone list at any given time. These numbers must first be submitted to our respective Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator (ORC), a fancy title for our counselors. Said numbers must be accompanied with the person's name, address and relationship to us before they can be activated. This process usually takes one to three days to complete, depending on the ORC. If a number is not on the list, the call will not go through. Three way calls are prohibited. As of January 2014, we have been permitted to call cell phones... legally! DOCCS is slowly emerging from the Dark Ages.

Correspondence: Your basic missives and greeting cards. Mail arrives and leaves the facility five days a week. This also applies to incoming packages, with the exception of something brought by a visitor. All incoming mail is opened outside our presence, physically checked for contraband (cash, drugs, etc.) and glanced over by a state employee, usually a civilian, before it is finally delivered to us. The only exception is "legal" correspondence, which must be opened in our presence.

Photographs and magazines are closely scrutinized. The former cannot reveal bare nipples or crotches, these areas must be covered, if only with a sheer material. Completely revealing nudity is prohibited unless it arrives directly from a business, such as a magazine. We are also not permitted to receive anything displaying gang signs or guns. If such material is in a magazine we are given the option to have the content blacked out or physically removed before it is placed in our possession.

Postage stamps: we are only allowed to purchase stamps from the facility commissary. The maximum allowed per purchase is 50, once every other week. If they are sent to us in the mail, or brought on a visit, they are viewed as contraband and returned or destroyed. Also, if a check or money order is enclosed in a letter a receipt will be drawn up, which we will receive and the funds will be placed into our inmate account. We receive .0685 percent

interest. It's wise to keep track of every dollar you receive or spend.

Visits: These can last up to six and half hours, depending on how early the guests arrive. They are conducted to the facility's visiting room, they vary from prison to prison, which is patrolled by corrections officers. The atmosphere here at Woodbourne is similar to that of a school or hospital cafeteria, a large open room with tables and chairs. Guests have access to vending machines for food, snacks and beverages for all of us to consume during the visit.

Visiting hours are from 8:15 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. on weekends and holidays. With the exception of holidays we are permitted only one visit per weekend. There are separate bathrooms for us and our visitors, and a play room for the children. We are granted the opportunity to take photographs together, which can be purchased for \$2 each.

Visitors should be advised that they will be passing through a metal detector, and even bras and shoes with metal in them will set the detectors off. They may not bring anything into the prison with them, except money for the vending machines. There are small lockers outside the waiting room where items like pens, wallets, and keys can be left. Cell phones are prohibited inside the prisons, including inside the waiting areas.

Personally, I prefer to correspond by mail with my family and associates. That allows me to express my thoughts and emotions without forgetting something of importance, which is easy to do on the phone, say. Also, I can take all the time I need to compose a letter. And, having become a published writer for this newspaper, I am actually most comfortable writing; I am in my element. Unfortunately, technology has moved on, and outside the walls everyone prefers to text!

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