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2018-7

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PAROLE PREPARATION PROJECT



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Things to Know About Working in Solidarity with People in Prison

The Parole Preparation Project collaborates with and advocates for parole-eligible people serving life sentences in New York State prisons. We train volunteers to work alongside parole applicants, many of whom have spent decades in prison and have been repeatedly denied parole, despite their eligibility for release.

Our Vision:

We strive to foster relationships between people in prison and community volunteers as a way to undermine the inner-workings of the criminal legal system and challenge traditional hierarchies of privilege and power. We also strive to promote relationships that are collaborative, meaningful, and long-lasting, and that are guided by principles of solidarity, self-determination, and love.

Regulation of Body and Mind:

Every aspect of the lives of people in prison are regulated by the state. The state limits people's contact with the outside world, their access to resources and vital services, their mobility throughout the prison where they are kept, and every other part of their daily life. People cannot receive calls. The calls they can make are recorded and catalogued. Their mail is scrutinized and searched. People cannot turn off their own lights or lock their own doors. They must eat at a certain time, with specific utensils, and bathe at a certain time. Privacy is non-existent.

People inside are also often deprived of food, therapeutic and medical services, medication, social interaction, physical contact, and time outdoors. Isolation is an intrinsic part of incarceration. Justified by notions of "protection" and "safety," many people are placed in solitary confinement, sometimes for months or years.

Undoubtedly each person's experience in prison is different, and experiences vary greatly from prison to prison. We share these generalities to provide context and insight into what life inside might be like, and because because the norms that exist on the inside (economies, values, things you can and can't do) are not always intuitive for people on the outside who do not have experience in prison. We also share them to emphasize that the moments of privacy and dignity that people in prison are able to procure exist *despite* these conditions, never because of them.

High Stakes and Serious Consequences

In order to ensure that people in prison conform to this culture of control, the state uses a multitude of tactics to force compliance. Physical, emotional and psychological abuse by officers and prison staff is commonplace. People inside are regularly subjected to brutality and neglect, sometimes sustaining disabling, life-threatening and even fatal injuries. There are numerous stories of people who have been killed by correctional officers inside New York State facilities,

just within the last few years. Officers and staff also frequently use strip searches, cell searches and other intrusive practices to humiliate and dehumanize people. Fear of retaliation sometimes prevents those inside from reporting such conduct.

The state has also created an elaborate system of disciplinary codes and rules, which regulate even the most basic activities. Forgetting to turn off a hot plate, or being “out of order” in a line, can result in extreme and disproportionate punishment. Time in solitary confinement, deprivation of mail or commissary rights are all potential consequences for even the smallest administrative infractions. There are many additional methods that aren’t written in the rulebooks that officers and staff use to regulate the minds and bodies of people in prison, such as on-going verbal and physical harassment, and many others.

Because of these high stakes, we must be hyper-vigilant and aware of the potential consequences our actions may have on the people we work with. Recognize that when you go for a visit, the person you are seeing will be strip-searched before and after. Acknowledge that all phone calls are recorded, and that discussing something on the phone might have consequences later on. Understand that if you accidentally mis-address an envelope, or send contraband in the mail, it could result in a cell search, a meeting with the prison Superintendent, a loss of commissary or even solitary confinement. One mistake by volunteers can result in serious consequences for people in prison.

Ultimately, people inside should be in control of determining what risks they are willing to take. Always ask about potential consequences before you make phone calls, send letters or decide on a certain course of action. Also respect the decisions of people inside--if someone chooses to engage in something you perceive to be risky, it’s okay to share your concerns, but ultimately they are in charge of their own experiences. We do not experience the consequences and it is never our role to make decisions for others.

Clarity is Key

It’s important to make sure the person knows who you are, what organization you are affiliated with, what you can offer, whether you are a volunteer or paid staff, and that you are or are not their attorney. Make sure to explain in detail and repeatedly, why you are there. Also make the scope of your advocacy clear. This is discussed in greater detail below, but it is important to establish your capacity upfront. This allows people to create realistic expectations, and to understand both your limitations and capabilities.

By opening up the conversation about the work you will do, you also create an opportunity to discuss how you will collaborate with one another.

Negotiation and Boundaries are Key

Setting boundaries is a crucial part of working in solidarity with people in prison. This is not because we believe that people inside need to be “bounded,” but because we believe that in order to build healthy, generative and meaningful relationships, we have to be in touch with our own needs. It is ok, and in fact vital, to tell someone you’re working with that you don’t have the

capacity to do something that they've asked of you. This ensures realistic expectations and prevents future disappointment and miscommunication. It also ensures that you don't use your privilege to convey the "no" in other ways, such as distancing yourself, ignoring the ask or simply not doing the thing requested.

It's also important to pause and really consider what your capacity might be in any given situation. The goal is not to exert predetermined boundaries, but to listen and really take in what the person is asking for. It's always better to say something like, "I don't know if that's something I can do, but let me think about it and get back to you on our next call/in a letter this week/etc." Sit with yourself, see what comes up for you, and then respond. An automatic "no" is just as complicated as an automatic "yes."

Additionally, this approach allows for collaborative thinking. Although you may not be able to do the exact thing that is asked of you, you can generate another solution together. By doing so, you are recognizing another person's humanity, and acknowledging that you are two people trying to build a successful relationship. Stating your needs and establishing boundaries also indicates that the other person has the capacity to appreciate and respect your wishes, and even reciprocate with their own.

This process of negotiation can also reduce some of the power dynamics present in your relationship, and is an important alternative to the historical dynamic in which the incarcerated person comes up with ideas for support and the person on the outside has the final word on the terms of the relationship.

Ultimately, taking time to consider your needs in relation to the needs of others ensure you don't burn out, or over-exert yourself, and that you can maintain your commitment in a sustainable, just and long-term way.

People are the Experts in Their Own Lives

People inside have survived, resisted, fought for their dignity, and created community for decades using their own tools, resources and coping mechanisms. They are the experts in their own lives, and our role is to offer resources, feedback and suggestions. Our ideas are merely contributions, not guiding principles. People also have very little agency in prison, and it is important to let people determine their own paths and processes. Further, supporting people's self-determination provides an antidote to the state violence and repression that people who live under conditions of constant state control experience daily.

People in prison are also experts in the criminal legal system, because they are the most impacted by it. Their expertise makes them leaders in this movement to transform it, and our role and responsibility is to inherit their wisdom and find ways to enact their vision.

Simultaneously, it is our responsibility to educate ourselves about the inner-workings of the criminal legal system and potential advocacy strategies, and not rely solely on people in prison to educate us about their experiences. See more below on that topic.

This is an internal Project memo. Please do not send this document to people in prison.

Assume Knowledge but Also Recognize Limitations

People inside are smart, creative and inventive, and have often done a lot of self-education. Many people are experts and scholars in a variety of academic fields, including the law. Jailhouse lawyers are some of the most talented attorneys in the state, and have the capacity to make significant contributions to their own legal cases and to criminal justice policy.

Conversely, people in prison hear a lot of misinformation, whether it is about legal issues, or other topics. Talking about these issues without judgment or condescension, and in an understandable fashion, is crucial to a relationship based on solidarity. Engaging in intellectual discussion and debate is a way to show respect for the person you are working with. It is a way to acknowledge their inherent intelligence.

Although an immense amount of self-education happens inside, it's important not to assume that everyone has had access to that experience. Many people were deprived of education from a young age, or had a learning disability that went undiagnosed, and therefore struggle with even basic literacy skills. It is about meeting people where they are at.

Listen Actively, Stay Curious and Engage in Meaningful Ways

Advocates often try to conform their behavior to what they believe to be the “professional” or “appropriate” way to act. They fixate so much on being sensitive and careful, that they can forget to be fully human and interact in real and genuine ways. The best advocate is someone who listens actively, hears the nuances in what the other person is saying, and responds by reflecting back what was just said. This involves letting people speak and take the time they need, offering prompts when it seems helpful, asking permission to talk about difficult things, and being present when emotional subjects arise. It also involves responding to what someone has said with your own natural thoughts and reactions. Being human, and sharing how something made you feel, is the best resource you can offer. It is also a sign of respect. The best you can do is be your true self—you don't have to be deferential to be creative, effective and empathetic. Deference is not the same as solidarity.

Recognize Dynamics of Power and Privilege

The criminal legal system and prison systems reflect and reinforce hierarchies of power, privilege, and oppression. All of us who have the time and resources to devote to building relationships with people inside come to this work from a place of power and privilege by virtue of living with far fewer restrictions on our freedom and far greater access to information and resources.

Many of us also have socially assigned power and privilege (such as white privilege, class privilege, citizenship status, male privilege or privilege from being gender conforming) and often simultaneously have experiences of oppression (based on gender identity or expression, homophobia or transphobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, or others).

Building relationships with people inside across differences in race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language access, age, experiences of incarceration, and other differences, requires careful attention to recognizing how dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression unfold. It also requires a deep commitment to examining those dynamics, striving always to share power, and taking responsibility and apologizing when we act or respond in oppressive ways. There's also much joy to be found in building powerful connections with people from an anti-oppressive framework, rooted in solidarity, love, and self-determination.

Show Up and Do Your Part

While we encourage you to ask questions, be curious and make genuine efforts to know and understand the experience of the person you're working with, it's also important to do your own research and not rely solely on others to educate you. Read everything you can about the criminal legal system and how it functions. Do research on the prison where the person who are working with lives. Investigate the history of violence at that prison. Seek information on the policies at that facility—when are visiting hours/days, what can you bring on a visit, what types of packages can you send, are there medical services at this prison, what types of programs are there?

Working in solidarity with people in prison also means doing everything you can to show up. Be available for a phone call at the time you said you would be available. Show up on time for visits. Reach out to family members as you promised. Follow through with everything you agreed to do. Many people in prison have experiences with broken promises and betrayal, and it is important not to replicate those experiences.

Also protect the information and material people have shared with you. Be organized. Take care of your files and ensure that people's confidential material is not lost or accessible to others.

Avoid End-Gaming and Focus on Relationship Building

While our ultimate goal is to advocate for the release of people in prison, don't fixate only on outcomes. The process of building relationships with people inside is, in itself, a meaningful and profound goal. The state uses prisons to disappear and invisibilize people inside them. By spending time in the visiting room, on the phone and in correspondence with people in prison, we undermine this system and generate new forms of connection and fellowship.