

Supporting Incarcerated Loved Ones and Families through COVID-19 Crisis

Work in Progress, Adapted from Beyond Prisons [Prisoner Support Guide](#)

Resource compiled by Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition

For more information on MPAC, please visit us on Facebook @MainePrisonerAdvocacyCoalition or our website at www.maineprisoneradvocacy.org

Introduction (adapted from Prisoner Support Guide above)

The following guide is intended to help incarcerated people through the COVID-19 public health crisis as well as create opportunities for people on the outside to support one another in various ways. Developing mutual aid networks around supporting prisoners is necessary for the current COVID-19 crisis but are necessary for public health in general as well. The intention in this document is to highlight particular needs of incarcerated people during this outbreak, and the potential interventions we can make to mitigate harm.

We shouldn't have to do any of this, but we can't rely on prisons to respond to this crisis in ways that attend to people's needs; prisons do not resolve, but rather have the potential to produce and extend crisis. This short guide includes ways to support prisoners now.

While some of the things listed here, like adding money to people's commissary or phone accounts can be problematic in terms of lining the pockets of third party actors, we also recognize that this is a moment of crisis and that we need to operate in a harm reduction mode to a) address people's immediate needs for things like food; b) facilitate communication; and c) provide additional support and community to people on the outside advocating for those on the inside.

COVID-19 Information

Please take care to ensure that you have accurate information and that you are sharing accurate information! Conspiracy theories and misinformation are particularly harmful right now.

Your Person's Contact Information

Having all this information on hand makes it easier to share information if you need to mobilize support for someone inside:

First and Last Name

Date of Birth

State Bureau Identification Number (SBI Number)

Name and address of the prison

Their housing unit

What To Do If Your Person Gets Sick

If your person becomes symptomatic and they are denied treatment, **document everything**. Ask them to give you one of their friend's names and to ask that person to call you or contact you if their symptoms become worse or if your person is taken to the infirmary and can't call you.

Prisons generally don't call families to let them know what is happening with their loved one inside so **having a plan in place for how to get information is crucial to their safety and your peace of mind**.

Call the warden and deputy warden and report that your person is sick and demand action. **Document the time and date of the call and who you spoke with**. If you reach an assistant, ask their name. Try to be polite, but also express a sense of urgency. Ask them what they plan to do and call back to check to see that it's done.

You can always call and ask to be connected with Medical (sometimes called the infirmary). The person answering the phone may or may not connect you, but the point is to ask. Do not capitulate to the prison's silence--make them give you information. The more people that do this, the more that it becomes expected that they should do this.

If you are not making progress, consider asking friends and family to make phone calls on behalf of your loved one to demand treatment.

We have made the request that the Maine Department of Corrections designate a family member or loved one be notified if a person is suspected of having COVID-19. We await a response from MDOC.

Food

Commissary

Because food is generally scarce in prison and most prisoners supplement their meals with purchases from the commissary it would be helpful to add money to people's books so that they can stock up on what they need. We fear that if the prison goes on lockdown

these services will be cut off and people will go hungry. If you are able to put money on your person's books do so now. The food they buy will not go to waste.

Food Allergies, Kosher Meals, etc.

If your person has food allergies know what they are and how severe they are. Ask them to keep you informed (to the extent possible) of any changes that the facility makes to their diet. Kosher meals are considered specialty meals in some facilities. If your person receives a kosher meal ask them to let you know if this changes in the event of a lockdown.

Medical

Make sure you are added as a HIPAA contact, so that you are able to conduct wellness checks on behalf of your person in case you aren't able to communicate with them directly. [More on HIPAA information here.](#)

Disabilities, Chronic Illnesses, Mental Health

Gather whatever information you have available regarding your person's condition including their diagnosis and any medications they are prescribed. Locate the contact information for the prison and ask for the direct number to the infirmary. If the need arises and your person has not received their regular treatment including medication, call and ask to be connected with the infirmary.

If they connect you, tell them who you are and why you are calling and give them the information for your person.

If the operator doesn't connect you with the infirmary, call and ask for the Warden's office and follow the same procedure.

If this doesn't get results start moving up the chain of command and contact the Commissioner for the Department of Corrections in your state, your State Senator and State Representative, and the Governor.

Transgender care

If your person is transgender and hormonal replacement therapy, they may experience gaps in receiving their hormones. Although this is not ideal, it is important for trans people to understand what side effects to look out for in case they are without HRT. For instance, for those assigned female at birth (AFAB) taking testosterone, they may get their periods back. Those assigned male at birth (AMAB) on estrogen can experience mood swings—as well as AFAB and intersex people on T—when their hormonal balance is off.

Although coercive detransition is inherently harmful, we can arm our people with knowing what to expect and how to emotionally prepare for long periods without HRT. Encourage your person to document physical and emotional side effects in detail to being without HRT.

Telephone Calls

If you are able to put some money on your person's phone account then do so. Phones may be difficult for them to access during this time especially if the facility is on lockdown, but having money on their account means that they can contact you or someone else even if it's just for a quick check in.

If the facility has video visits and you are able to afford it, set up a video visit as soon as possible. This is particularly important if the facility has halted in-person visits. This is a poor substitute for in-person visits, but it allows you to still see each other. Contact, even virtual, is important both to their mental health and general well-being and to yours.

Depending on the facility there are different companies that offer video visits. You will have to check with the prison, sometimes this information is available on their website. If it's not and you are in communication with your person ask them what company the prison uses.

Legal

NOTE: We strongly encourage you to consult with an attorney or legal aid worker if possible. The following is information we have found helpful, but it does not constitute legal advice.

Court Appearances

Document and keep track of court appearances or postponements. If your person is represented by a court-appointed attorney you should ask your person to contact them and find out what the plan is if their court dates get moved. This information also applies if you have private counsel.

Legal Visits and Legal Mail

If the prison goes on lockdown legal visits may also be cancelled. Contact your attorney for information and if they can go in to visit then ask that they do.

In the event of mail disruption, legal mail will also not be delivered. This has consequences for people's cases. Contact your attorney and ask what to do. They are best able to advise you about next steps including postponements etc.

Case Files & Important Documents

While it may not be an option for everyone, we encourage people to send important documents outside facilities for safekeeping with people they can trust if possible. Lockdowns and other crises often involve shakedowns and searches and, in-turn, the destruction of property.

If your person's case files are destroyed during this crisis, please contact their attorney if they have one and call the warden's office to ask if they will be covering the cost to replace lost files. You can contact the court and the prothonotary's office to request a copy, but they are likely to charge you. Prisoners can request their own case files by writing directly to the prothonotary's office. You should contact a legal aid clinic in your area if you need assistance.

The following chapters from [Columbia Law School's Jailhouse Lawyers Manual](#) may be helpful:

1. [Chapter 19: Your Right to Communicate with the Outside World](#)
2. [Chapter 23: Your Right to Adequate Medical Care](#)

Religious Considerations

Ramadan

Begins: Thursday, April 23

Ends: Saturday, May 23

Facilities may not allow prisoners to observe Ramadan this year. If your person is Muslim talk with them about this and ask them what they need. If there's an Imam at the facility ask for their name and reach out to them to ask how they can help support Muslim prisoners during this time.

Pesach/Passover

Begins: April 8

Ends: April 15

Passover is a Jewish holiday with special dietary restrictions. The same recommendation of contacting an imam applies here with a rabbi.

Regarding kosher meals and kosher-for-Pesach foods, Jewish religious law regarding

food (kashrut) both allows for and mandates eating treif (non-kosher items) if they are necessary for survival or recovery from illness. So if someone is ill or denied kosher food, they are permitted to eat prohibited foods during that emergency. This law is called pikuash nefesh.

Obviously, it's crucial that Jewish prisoners are provided with what they need to be observant in their own way and that should be priority, but this information can be helpful when that isn't possible.

Releases

If your person is due to be released in the next 30, 60 or 90 days ask them what the facility is telling them regarding their release. Our concern is that the crisis could be used as a pretext to extend confinement and keeping records will help us to better organize support. We need to know what is happening in order to be able to respond effectively.

Families and loved ones can contact the Warden, call the District Attorney's Office, and your Governor to demand the release of your person.

Grievances

Encourage your person to use the internal grievance process. Yes, we know that the prison's grievance process can be inadequate and that the people and institution that you are complaining about should not be able to decide whether the grievance has merit. However, let's use all the tools that we have available to us and the grievance process is one. Grievances give us a paper trail and can be used as the foundation for or in support of lawsuits. We understand that litigation is another tool and not a cure all. We document and support prisoners that file grievances as part of an overall strategy.

Lockdown

If the facility is on lockdown it means that prisoners are confined to their cells 24 hours a day. All movement is terminated including no mail delivered inside of the facility, no access to phones, no access to video visits, no access to tablets (for facilities where prisoners share tablets and have to check them out of a kiosk), no recreation, and no religious services. During a lockdown there may be fewer staff on duty and prisoners are not allowed to access daily showers. These measures, which prison officials have long claimed to be for safety of staff and prisoners, do not cohere with what medical professionals are saying about how to stop the spread of Covid-19.

Lockdowns also intensify the existing tensions inside. If your person tells you that they're being harassed, had their cells shaken down, denied meals, medical attention or anything along those lines, please document it. Get names and times and then call the warden. Keep a running list (hopefully not necessary) of these incidents.

You should contact the prison and ask them when the lockdown will be lifted. Connect with other loved ones to demand that lockdowns be lifted.

Local Resources for Families

Rose's Room is a peer support group focused on challenges we all face during our loved one's incarceration because: "Individuals don't go to prison, whole families do." There are monthly meetings in Auburn, Bangor, Westbrook, Rockland, Augusta, and Farmington.

During this time of physical distancing, Rose's Room is developing plans for statewide mutual support zoom meetings in coordination with the Maine Prisoner Re-Entry Network. For information to get on the mailing list or connect with support, you can email rosesroom2018@gmail.com or call 207-998-2547.

Organize

There are efforts across the country to get people released from prison. We are working to compile as many of these as possible and work in coalition with other groups to create demands and release plans, but while we work on this we are sharing calls by different groups on our social media. We encourage local efforts and you can always tag us or message us if you find something that we've overlooked.

Call the Warden and let them know of your concerns and ask what they are doing in response to COVID-19.

Call the Governor of your state and let them know of your concerns and ask what they are doing in response to COVID-19 in prisons.

Call your other elected officials and let them know of your concerns and ask what they are doing in response to COVID-19 in prisons.

We are not powerless in this moment and the more of us that call the better.