

### National Letter Writing Day 2019

December 7th is National Letter Writing Day, a day to engage in and celebrate the lost art of letter writing. While conceived of as a lighthearted holiday to inspire people to put pen to paper rather than fingers to keyboard, this day has a more serious meaning for JHA and our constituents.

For the more than two million people incarcerated in the United States, 39,000 of whom are in prisons run by the state of Illinois, writing and receiving letters isn't an art; it is a lifeline. For people who are cut off from family, loved ones, and the public with limited access to technology, letters remain one of the few ways to communicate with people outside of prison walls. It is important for people in prison to build and maintain relationships with their family and loved ones; years of geographic and emotional distance only increase the strain put on the human connections that are critical to people's success when they return home.

Letters allow people to stay in touch and can also be a way to give voice to things happening inside prisons that the public does not know about. As an independent correctional oversight organization with articulated privileged mail status within the Illinois prison system, JHA is one of the only places people in prison can write without fear of reprisal or retaliation, to have questions answered, information provided, and to share concerns, abuses and fears. JHA receives and sends confidential letters to people incarcerated in Illinois and we take this responsibility very seriously, responding to every letter we receive no matter what the topic or issue.

In order to write letters to anyone, people incarcerated in Illinois must use precious and limited funds to purchase paper, pens/pencils, envelopes and stamps through commissary, often at inflated prices. People not only make sacrifices to prioritize these supplies, but they also go to great lengths to have their words put to paper in order to stay in touch with people on the outside. We read letters that have been dictated by people who can't write and those who don't speak English. We read letters about abuses people have suffered or witnessed that express the risk being taken to share the information with us due to the fear of retaliation should the letter be read by corrections staff. Yet people in prisons bravely write to us in order to shed light on the dark corners of this closed system.

Letters not only inform us of the realities inside of prisons; they have meaning and value to prisoners who await an individual response. The mother of someone who is currently incarcerated articulated the impact of our letters in this way:

*“Truly you have shown compassion to those whose voices are often ignored, as if they don’t have a right to speak or a right to be heard. You, however, have taken steps to listen to their stories, to hear their pain, and to respond in a way that I’m sure will bring a higher success rate in transitioning back to society.”*

This is important work that requires time, expertise and resources. JHA spends between \$100-\$250 weekly on postage, in addition to the costs of stationery, printing, and administrative expenses incurred in responding to every letter individually. Today on National Letter Writing Day, we encourage you to consider the impact a letter can make in the life of someone who is incarcerated.

*You can support the work of JHA’s Prison Response work by donating at [www.thejha.org/donate](http://www.thejha.org/donate) or by signing up to help respond to letters at [www.thejha.org/volunteer](http://www.thejha.org/volunteer).*