

Lifelines to Solitary

Direct Outreach to People in Solitary Confinement

A Project of Solitary Watch

On any given day in the United States, more than 120,000 people live in solitary confinement in the nation's prisons and jails. Individuals in solitary confinement spend 22 to 24 hours a day locked in small, often windowless cells, without human contact and usually without work, education, or programming of any kind. This type of isolation and sensory deprivation has been shown to cause extreme anguish and, in many cases, lasting psychological damage. It has also been identified by the United Nations as a form of torture.

As part of our work, Solitary Watch has always reached out to people in solitary with updates, letters, and cards, reminding them that they have not been forgotten by the world outside their cells. We call this project Lifelines to Solitary. In 2015, we expanded the project to include the first prison pen pal program specifically designed to reach people in solitary confinement.

In an age of electronic communications, letters often remain the one and only way to penetrate the dark world of solitary confinement, and to establish contact with a group of people who have been banished and buried both by society and by the prison system. We believe this communication has the potential to transform the lives not only of the individuals in solitary, but also of those on the outside who bear witness to their suffering and resilience.

We already have hundreds of committed pen pals on the outside who have been paired up with individuals in solitary. But there are hundreds more people in solitary who are awaiting a pen pal with whom they can exchange letters.

You can bring a spark of human contact into the darkness of solitary confinement by taking part in the Lifelines to Solitary correspondence program.

How the Program Works

The first step is reaching out to Solitary Watch for more information about Lifelines to Solitary (at the email on the following page). If you decide to join the program, you will then receive the name and address of someone in solitary confinement, detailed guidelines, and a PO box where your correspondent can write to you. Solitary Watch will forward all letters to your own address, so that your personal information remains private. We are also available for ongoing advice and support.

Some things to note:

- People in solitary need ongoing human contact. We ask everyone who signs up as a pen pal to make a commitment to write at least one letter a month for at least one year (and hopefully longer). Letters do not need to be long, but they do need to be sent consistently. If your life circumstances change unexpectedly and you cannot continue the correspondence, we ask that you let us know promptly so that we can assign your correspondent a new pen pal.
- We accept all pen pal requests from people in solitary, provided they agree to the guidelines for the program. We do not screen on the basis of the crimes for which they have been incarcerated, and seldom even know what those crimes are. Many of the people who participate in the program have been convicted of serious felonies. If for any reason this is not something you are comfortable with, this program may not be right for you. We are glad to suggest other ways to work for more humane prison conditions, including joining an advocacy campaign or donating to Solitary Watch to help us in our efforts to expose and end the torture of solitary confinement.
- Unfortunately, we do not have the capacity to take requests for pen pals who are a particular gender or age or who are located in a particular state. We do encourage all pen pals to let us know if something specific about your correspondence makes you feel uncomfortable. If it cannot be resolved, we can assign you a new pen pal.
- You must be 21 or older to sign up as a pen pal—no exceptions. We are happy to suggest alternate activities related to solitary confinement for young people and for school, faith, or community youth groups.

How to Get Started

To learn more about the program, ask questions, or express your interest in becoming a pen pal, simply email Marlies Talay, Lifelines to Solitary Project Director, at marlies@solitarywatch.org. Please also let Marlies know if you are part of a faith community, community organization, or other group that wants to participate in the program together; we can often provide a virtual orientation.

Thank you for your interest in Lifelines to Solitary!

To learn what it is like to live in long-term solitary confinement, read “[A Sentence Worse Than Death](#)” by William Blake, who was held in solitary in New York State for more than 30 years.

Lifelines to Solitary is a project of Solitary Watch, a national nonprofit watchdog group that investigates and documents the use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers. To learn more about solitary confinement, or to make a donation to support Lifelines, please visit www.solitarywatch.org.