

PVS Policy:

Maintain Appropriate Boundaries at All Times

The Bureau of Prisons spells out its policy in precise terms to be crystal clear:

- Show no partiality toward, or become emotionally, physically, sexually, or financially involved with inmates, former inmates, family members or close friends of inmates or former inmates.
- Do not offer or give to or accept from an inmate or a former inmate or any member of his/her family, or to any person known to be associated with an inmate or former inmate, any article, favor, or service that is not authorized [within the normal bounds of visiting in the Visiting Room].

The above statements are adapted from the Bureau's Program Statement 3420.11 Standards of Employee Conduct - Section 5.b and c.

Maintaining strict boundaries on conduct prevents manipulators from co-opting naïve volunteers to obtain favors that are not allowed. There is much you do not know about any individual. For example, a prisoner might ask you to supply the address of a family member with whom the person has lost contact. This person might actually be a gang member, a family member who does not want such contact, or even a victim. Following the rules at all times protects you from becoming compromised and vulnerable to the next "ask."

The rules are your shield. Let them protect you.

Focus on the visit itself

PVS visiting is a relationship that occurs within professional bounds.

If an action cannot be accomplished within the confines of the visiting room, in face-to-face conversation with the prisoner, then it probably is not allowed.

Keeping this boundary in mind will help you avoid temptations to "help out" with:

- Doing legal research
- Meeting financial needs
- Making outside contacts, or
- Sending books or any other items.

Handling romantic overtures

Occasionally, a prisoner will make an incorrect assumption about your relationship. If romantic overtures, suggestive comments, or inappropriate nonverbal actions occur during your visit, make your boundaries known to the prisoner and note this in your visit report. You are not expected to visit someone you are uneasy with or tolerate ill treatment from any prisoner.

If you receive a suggestive letter, send it to the PVS national office. A staff member will contact you to discuss the best course of action (for example, arranging to have another visitor see the prisoner if the behavior is not corrected, or removing the prisoner from the PVS visiting list until the prisoner agrees to proper conduct with visitors).

PVS visitors are listeners

PVS visitors listen – with compassion and confidentiality. They do not say "I can help you with that." While your companionship and friendship can provide an opening of trust that may let you share your experience even though you are not a counsellor, generally PVS visitors encourage prisoners to find their own solutions to problems with the resources they have available.



To summarize: PVS visitors are **NOT**

- > romantic partners
- > pen pals
- > counsellors, or
- > case managers.

Prison Rule: No Contact or Correspondence Outside the Prison Visit

As you get to know prisoners you visit, it may seem natural to want to send them a book, a favorite quotation, or an encouraging letter. Currently, the BOP does not allow correspondence between volunteer visitors and prisoners outside the visit itself. (An exception was made during the coronavirus pandemic, when visiting was suspended. This was a special case.) If you violate this policy, it will almost certainly be noticed, and you may lose your visiting privileges.

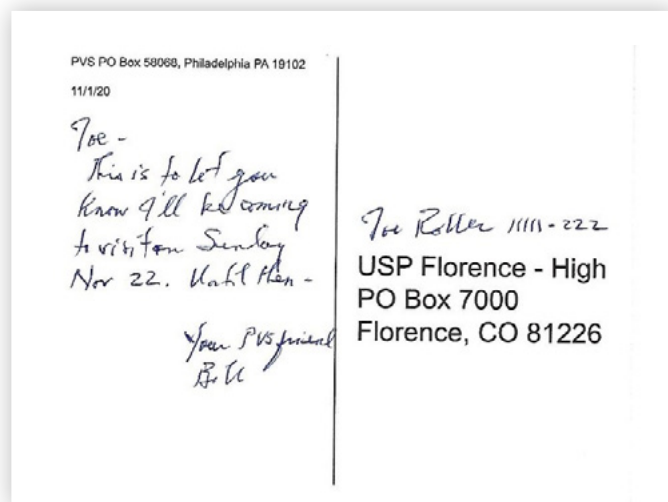
Never give your home address, telephone number, or email address to a prisoner.

Protecting your personal information shields you and your family from unwanted contact. No matter how much you come to trust an individual prisoner, maintain this shield.

- Never mention your address or phone number or email. Prisoners are not allowed to write or call PVS visitors. And PVS visitors are not allowed to correspond with prisoners or any associated family or friends of prisoners.

- Sending regular postcards or notes announcing the next visit is an approved communication for PVS. This is not a vehicle for conveying any information other than about the visit.
- Use only the PVS national office as a return address on the postcard. This helps identify the source and purpose of the card. If a prisoner is transferred, it will be returned to that address.

Prisoner Visitation and Support
PO Box 58068
Philadelphia, PA 19102



Always use the PVS address as your return address in correspondence with prisoners.

Please also be aware that many prisons do not allow you to have a photograph of yourself taken with the prisoner, though prisoners sometimes make this request. If you would like to say yes, first determine whether it is allowed.

If you are not sure it's allowed...

This list of “Nos” paraphrases the Bureau’s policy in concrete terms. Any thought of how to get around a rule is bound to lead to trouble which could endanger your visiting rights or even the whole PVS program. Better to be safe than sorry. Just say NO.

NO correspondence. This means no letter writing back and forth with a prisoner and no exchange of information, either of a personal nature or in response to questions or problems.⁸

PVS postcards or notes are an approved communication practice for PVS. Keep the message simple by giving only the next date and time for your visit. No extraneous topics or other information should be included.

No email. If a prisoner attempts to email you, or if a prisoner’s family member tries to connect with you on Facebook, inform the main office. Do not accept the invitation.

No phone calls. Do not accept a call from a prisoner under any circumstances and notify the PVS national office of any attempt to call you. You cannot call the prisoner directly and should not attempt to do so.

No money. Many prisoners are indigent or have very limited means to buy items from the prison commissary. They earn very little for the work they do and often have restitution to pay or families with needs. You can offer sympathy, but nothing else. Never attempt to send money to a prisoner.

If a prisoner should ask for some odd or unusual favor and you are not sure if the rules would allow this, the safe response is to say NO.

Leave no opening for repeated requests in an attempt to wear you down.

Requests to contact family members or friends sometimes come after a long preface about hardship, necessity, and a touching personal ask built on your relationship. For example, the prisoner expresses a heartfelt desire to be a good parent to a struggling child who wants to come and live nearby but needs to find a job and is interested in a field that you have experience in. Can you make a contact or referral to help? The answer is, “Sorry, no.”

**If you are not sure,
the answer is probably
“NO.”**

No correspondence ▪ No email
No phone calls ▪ No sending money
No outside contact ▪ No internet involvement
No physical contact beyond a handshake

8. The BOP allowed an exception to this policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, when visiting was suspended. Visitors wrote to the prisoners they visited in care of the Re-Entry Affairs Coordinator, who forwarded the mail to the prisoners. Prisoners who chose to correspond wrote to the PVS national office, which forwarded replies to the appropriate visitor. This was a special exception to the “no correspondence” rule.

What to do if a prisoner contacts you

Although PVS visitors do not provide prisoners their address, phone number or email, accidents happen that can disclose information. Some prisoners are resourceful enough to find information through public media. Prisoner attempts to make contact are not secret and are often known to prison staff. **To protect your visiting privilege**, follow the guidance below if contact occurs. Always inform the PVS national office that a contact attempt has taken place.

If you receive a letter from a prisoner:

Do not destroy any correspondence from a prisoner. If you receive a letter from a prisoner that does not come from the PVS office, report it to the PVS national office immediately. If the content of the letter seems inappropriate, also scan and email the letter to the office.

Whether or not the content is inappropriate, tell the prisoner the next time you see him or her that they are not to write you and that failure to comply may terminate your visiting relationship. The national office or the local coordinator will work with you on how to handle such a situation.

If a prisoner calls you:

Do not accept a phone call from a prisoner.

- If the call is collect and identified as coming from a correctional facility, refuse the call and hang up.
- Notify the PVS national office of the attempted call.
- Advise the prisoner during the next visit that you cannot take phone calls and that attempting to call may terminate visiting.
- If the call somehow comes in direct, tell the prisoner that you cannot take the call and hang up immediately.
- Call the PVS office immediately.

Remember that prisoner phone calls are tracked, recorded and monitored by prison systems. Calls are cross-referenced against volunteer phone numbers. If a connection is found, the prison may immediately suspend a visitor as a volunteer.

If you should receive an advisory message from TRULINCS soliciting consent for exchanging email with a prisoner, decline the invitation immediately and block any further contact from the prisoner.

Examples of inappropriate letter content include:

- > passionate/romantic letters, notes or cards,
- > offers by the prisoner to do something for you,
- > requests by prisoner that you do a favor for him or her,
- > suggestive or obscene writings or photographs,
- > legal documents, or
- > medical records.

If a prisoner emails you:

Prisoners in some facilities have access to a secure email system called TRULINCS (Trust Fund Limited Inmate Computer System) for corresponding with family and friends. According to federal policy, "Each inmate must be approved to use the system and each person that an inmate wants to communicate with must give their permission to do so."

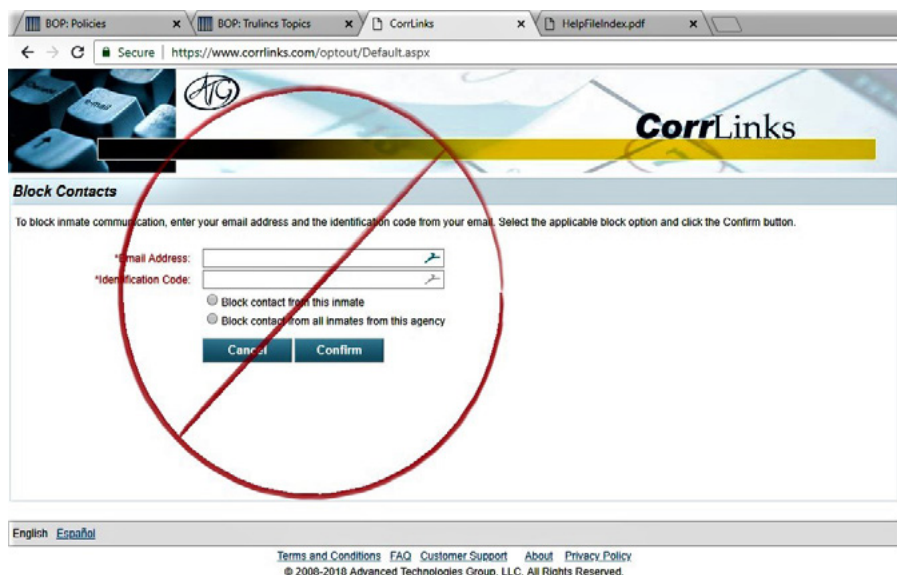
The TRULINCS system uses an outside service called CorrLinks provided by ATG (Advanced Technology Group). Emails may bear this name. TRULINCS also operates the inmate phone system.

- Inform the PVS national office of the attempted contact as a preventive measure to protect your visiting. Advise the prisoner at your next visit that you cannot accept email correspondence.
- Be aware that TRULINCS messages are monitored and actively screened.
- Review how your email address could possibly have been compromised. For example, if you brought in an email

copy of your request to visit, it may have exposed your email address. Or some institutional email addresses follow a pattern and could be readily guessed. The prisoner had to add you to his contact list and had it approved before sending the invitation. The PVS national office may be able to inquire and have your name removed from the prisoner's contact list.

Even after the prisoner is released – it's still **"no contact"**

Contact with prisoners after release is not allowed. Consider the "no contact" rule to be indefinite.



Example of an email from a prisoner.