



Welcome to the prisoner solidarity working group!

We are a coalition of organizers, activists, friends, family, and formerly incarcerated individuals who seek humane treatment and restorative justice for our neighbors behind bars. Our current meeting time and location is:

Every first and third Monday of the month, from 5-8pm at Selden Arcade

These sessions are, at present, co-hosted by representatives of two local organizations: **Humanities Behind Bars (HBB)**, and the **Tidewater Incarcerated Workers' Organizing Committee (IWOC)**. Humanities Behind Bars works toward the abolition of the prison industrial complex through outreach and education initiatives, such as providing classes on humanities subjects to inmates at local jails, and hosting public discussions and film screenings centered on critically evaluating our "justice system" as it currently exists, as well as alternatives to the Prison-Industrial Complex. The Incarcerated Workers' Organizing Committee is a committee within a larger union, the Tidewater Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWOC seeks to assist prisoners in self-organizing efforts against prison labor exploitation, as well as for demanding more favorable conditions overall through prisoner-worker unionization. *If you are interested in participating in IWOC's organizing efforts, please ask an IWOC representative (i.e. Cori or Luisa) for Appendix B to this packet.*

Outside of group sessions, session facilitators can be contacted through the following methods:

Email Cori: rmagnolia@protonmail.com

Email Tidewater IWW: tidewateriww@protonmail.com

Message Tidewater IWW OR Humanities Behind Bars on Facebook:

facebook.com/tidewateriww OR facebook.com/humanitiesbehindbars

Visit Humanities Behind Bars' webpage: humanitiesbehindbars.org

Visit the webpage for our legal aid fund: tidewatersolidaritycenter.wordpress.com

This packet is an abridged version of a longer, more resource-heavy primer, compiled by Tidewater IWOC. You may ask an IWOC representative for a link to the online primer.

There are two groups of prisoners you may write to, depending on your interest and commitment level: for simplicity's sake, we'll call them "**Group A**" and "**Group B.**" **Group A** are primarily contacts within local and regional jails, all of whom are interested in casual, friendly correspondence. *Anyone can write to these contacts*, and we ask only that writers keep any promises they may make to the inmates they write to, i.e. writing to them at least monthly if you say that you will. A majority of prisoners in **Group B** are in state or federal prison, and should be written to *only by people who are interested in IWOC organizing, and are able to coordinate with IWOC regularly to address the inmates' needs.*

Using our PO Box

First, please fill out our survey for new participants, so we know how to contact you if we receive mail addressed to you in our PO box. **Our PO box is checked every Monday**, and mail is brought to each letter-writing session, or else forwarded to the addressee through the method chosen in the survey.

Our PO Box address is:

Tidewater IWOC
PO Box 1878
Norfolk, VA 23501

Writing to Group A: City and regional jail inmates

Generally, our introductory letters to inmates from this group will include a brief statement about who we are and why we are writing to them in particular (i.e. if we got their name from another inmate, or from an HBB instructor). We will ask them if they would like to talk about conditions at the jail, their personal tribulations within the “justice” system, or whether they just want to engage in friendly correspondence. Many of the inmates on this list are students from a past or current HBB humanities course, and have an interest in creative writing, music or art--if you also share these interests, many of these individuals are happy to trade creative writing pieces! Additionally, if they are interested in having their creative writing published, HBB is working on zines filled with the writings and art of incarcerated creators. Further recommendations for first-time writers can be found further in this document.

If you write to a prisoner from this list, please let us know, so we can mark them down as having an assigned advocate. If you are no longer able to correspond with a particular inmate, please email Cori (rmagnolia@protonmail.com) so that we can update our database to reflect that they are in need of an advocate.

We keep an ongoing list of complaints and demands for various institutions in Google Docs. If you would like to contribute to this list with entries from letters with your pen pals, please ask an IWOC representative for access to the documents. **Please also let an IWOC representative know immediately if a particular inmate has an emergent concern, such as mail censorship, medical neglect, or maltreatment by jail authorities, that you need help from the group to address.**

Writing to Group B: State and federal prisoners

If you write to a prisoner from this list, we do require a commitment to working with IWOC in our organizing efforts. The reason for this is that our contacts have expressed an interest in self-organizing against inhumane conditions at the institutions they are held in, and are therefore relying upon us to provide prompt and effective responses to their requests and complaints. These requirements include:

- Informing IWOC representatives, either at a session or via email (rmagnolia@protonmail.com), whenever you receive or send a letter to a particular inmate, and any relevant contents, i.e.

updates on organizing efforts, complaints of poor conditions or retaliation, transfer of an inmate to another facility, need for outside-advocate assistance or advice on a particular issue, etc.

- *A commitment to answering all communications from an inmate whose correspondence you have taken responsibility for in a timely manner.* If you find that you cannot continue to correspond with a prisoner as frequently as they need, that's ok! Just let IWOC know, and we'll find someone to take over correspondence with that inmate.
- If you are using our PO Box for correspondence with these prisoners, mail will be opened, digitally scanned, and sent to you via email or Dropbox as soon as we receive it. We will also give you the physical letter in person or through your forwarding address, but because **we are trying to ensure that prisoners with pressing concerns are having them addressed in the shortest possible timeframe**, we feel it is important that all letters are read as soon as they are received.
- For the above stated reasons, if IWOC is aware that you have received a letter but you have not responded to it *within 21 days of receipt*, we will transfer responsibility for communicating with that inmate to another IWOC member.
- If you are communicating with prisoners for organizing purposes, we can give you access to a Dropbox compilation of resources that are helpful to this end (i.e. union membership applications, informational literature, complaint forms, etc). Please email us if you need access to the IWOC Dropbox folder.

Other than writing to prisoners, how can I help?

Our group is always seeking to expand its ability to respond to the needs of our incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated neighbors! *If you possess skills or resources that you would be willing to utilize for the benefit of our incarcerated neighbors, please let us know in our new member survey.* Right now, our most pressing needs are for people with the following skills or resources:

Fundraisers: Not only are we organizing a legal aid fund for people at-risk for discrimination and being targeted for prosecution and imprisonment by the state, but we also require a steady stream of funds to acquire postage, rent our PO box, call inmates, contribute to their canteen funds, and materially assist inmates exiting the carceral system as they attempt to re-integrate into their communities.

Publicists: One of the most disempowering aspects of incarceration how thoroughly it robs its victims of their voices. If you have a social media profile with a large public following, connects within media outlets (such as the Virginian-Pilot or Alt Daily), are skilled with writing op-eds, are confident in speaking to reporters about issues faced by incarcerated people, can maintain social media pages for incarcerated individuals who are being targeted for repression, or are skilled at making flyers or other visually-striking materials to publicize events and issues pertaining to our purposes, we need you!

Educators and resource coordinators: We want to give our contacts the best possible chance of remaining out of the clutches of the carceral state once they have made their exit, and we can help them accomplish this by teaching them the skills and connecting them to the resources they need to survive (i.e. pertaining to finding jobs, transportation, housing, medical care, mental health care and support groups, access to higher education, information literacy, legal literacy, etc), as well as educating the public about the needs of our incarcerated neighbors.

Advice for First-Time Writers

Decide ahead of time what you are and are not able to do:

Do not put your mental health at risk by engaging in traumatic associations. It is usually possible to find out what crimes a person has been accused or convicted of by searching online. The Tidewater IWW holds that nearly person who has committed a bona-fide “criminal” act is capable of rehabilitation. However, if you are not comfortable with writing to people convicted of a certain class of crimes (i.e. if you are an abuse survivor who is not comfortable writing to people convicted of sexual or physical abuse, or if you’re a recovering addict who would not want to write to someone convicted of distributing controlled substances), that is ok! *Only you can decide who you are comfortable with writing to.*

Decide what kind of correspondence you are and are not comfortable with partaking in. From the Black and Pink guide on writing to LGBTQ prisoners:

“Given that many [inmates] have no access to healthy sexual expression inside of prison, at times they seek that through relationships with pen pals. If your pen pal writes a sexually explicit letter to you, and you do not want to write sexually explicit letters with your pen pal, it is important to be very clear with them. We encourage you to write back and be clear about the type of friendship you are looking to have and what your boundaries are about the types of things you want to write about. We suggest giving your pen pal a chance to hear from you that you don’t want to write sexually explicit letters and allow them a chance to respond appropriately.”

Additionally, it is important to realize that many (if not the overwhelming majority) of inmates have experienced or witnessed traumatic instances or patterns of violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse, poverty, the murder or death of loved ones, and participation in sex work, among other issues of an emotionally damaging nature. Many of our correspondents are forthcoming about these experiences, which can provide both the “inside” writer and their “outside” supporter with a level of emotional intimacy, trust, and a bond centered in healing that the inmate (and sometimes, their “outside” pen pal!) rarely have the chance to experience, but some may find information of this sort distressing. If you are uncomfortable with hearing about any of these experiences, it may be wise to abstain from correspondence, and engage in prisoner solidarity work in another role, such as fundraising or educating “outside” members of the public about prisoner-centered issues.

Do not make promises you cannot keep. If you’re only able to commit to responding to a prisoner once every month or two, let them know. Do not offer other sources of aid, such as court support, financial support, or publicity, if you are not sure you can fulfill them. Tidewater IWW is glad to assist as much as we can along these lines, and though we are growing considerably as a group, our core organizers are few, and have little in the way of financial means. We are glad to reach out to other prisoner advocacy groups if an inmate has a need we cannot fulfill ourselves, however.

On using pen names:

Using a pen name minimizes the risk of corresponding with strangers. While the number of incarcerated individuals who are truly “dangerous” is far fewer than many would have us believe, there is a certain level of risk inherent in giving your full name to a person you do not already know,

particularly if you have a “unique” name, and you are not using a PO Box as an added layer of identity protection. See page 2 for our PO box address.

Using a gender-neutral pen name can protect you from sexual harassment. Some participants with “feminine”-sounding names have been sexually solicited by the people they have written to. Some people are okay with this, but others are understandably made uncomfortable or unsafe by unsolicited advances of this nature.

Using a pen name can protect you from state surveillance. Some friends and allies of our group have been subjected to surveillance and prosecution for their involvement in outside activist work. Participating in prison-centered organizing can also put one at risk for state surveillance, especially if we’re doing our work well enough to make material gains and generate publicity for the cause. The Tidewater IWW *does not condone or engage in violent or otherwise illegal activities*, but abstaining from illegal activity may not always protect innocent individuals from extralegal state surveillance. Using a pen name and PO box return address can reduce the potential for retaliation against individual participants.

Understand the contraband and speech rules for the institution you are writing to:

Many institutions forbid so-called “dangerous” speech, such as language that openly encourages prison riots, acts of violence, substance use, describes sexual acts, etc. To ensure that your letters will not be rejected and/or land your pen pal in hot water with jail authorities, ensure that your language does not obviously violate censorship guidelines, and do not suggest that the person you are corresponding with engage in actions that may put them at risk.

Some institutions also forbid certain types of stationery, colored ink, or the inclusion of blank stationery and stamps in the mail. Please check the specific contraband guidelines of the jail you are writing to before sending your mail. For your convenience, we have provided guidelines to a few of the institutions we write most frequently beginning on page 7 of this primer.

If your letters are being returned due to unjust censorship, or if you need advice on tailoring your language to pass prison censor, please feel free to contact the Tidewater IWW.

Ten major points on writing an introductory letter:

Your first letter to a prisoner does not need to be a work of artistic or epic scale, especially if you don’t know anything about the person you’re writing to. We recommend keeping it brief, and being honest and open about your intentions. Here are our recommendations for what to include (and exclude) from your first letter:

1. **A brief statement about who you are, your affiliations, and why you’re writing to them:**
Ex. “Hi! My name is Joe, and I’m a student at ODU who is concerned about the conditions in our local jails.”
2. **How you found their name:** Are you “cold calling” them from a local jail database? Did you receive their name from a letter-writing group that was told they would like to be written to, or from another prisoner? Most people we talk to want to know why they were singled out for correspondence.

3. **What kind of correspondence you're interested in:** Do you want to find out about the conditions at the jail? Help inside organizers peacefully resist being forced to engage in unpaid labor? Or just trade poems, drawings, or personal anecdotes? If you would rather leave that decision up to the inmate (we suggest this, in nearly all cases), let them know. Also ask them to make it clear if there are any contents they want kept private, or to be shared with the letter-writing group or public at-large.
4. **How often you can write to them:** See above statement about only making promises you can uphold. Once you establish a rapport, you might offer to correspond via phone call or visitation.
5. **Other ways you can help:** If you're willing to provide more tangible forms of support right off of the bat, let them know. You can make specific suggestions (i.e. court support, or publishing their poems or art in a zine, and putting any proceeds in their canteen) or let them make their own suggestions. Usually we will save offers of this kind until after rapport has been established with an individual inmate.
6. **Ask for contacts:** Ask if anyone they know would like to be written to, and/or tell them that anyone interested in correspondence can write to our PO Box. Pass along any contacts you receive to Tidewater IWW (tidewateriww@protonmail.com).
7. **Include your return address in the actual letter:** Jails sometimes throw out envelopes, and Virginia state prisons will merely photocopy the original letter, and give the inmate a copy of the original.
8. **Number each page of the letter:** For example, write Page 1 of 4, Page 2 of 4, etc., so the recipient will be aware if part of the letter has been "misplaced" by jail authorities. You may also want to encourage the inmate to do the same. This is especially important if you are writing about issues of a sensitive nature (i.e. institutional conditions; inside organizing campaigns).
9. **Don't be afraid to get personal,** but avoid pushiness, making presumptions about the recipient's character or what they're willing to divulge, or projecting your political beliefs onto prisoners.
10. **Don't be condescending, or make racist, sexist, classist, etc. assumptions or assertions.** This one should be self-explanatory, but it bears repeating. Prisoners are neither objects of valor nor pity; they are simply human beings, with all of the complexities, virtues, and flaws that people on the "outside" could be expected to possess.

Virginia State Prison Correspondence Guidelines

"Incoming inmate general mail should be addressed as follows:

Inmate's full name

Inmate's state identification number (7 digits)

Name of Facility or Institution

Address and Zip Code

The Department of Corrections encourages inmate correspondence that is directed to socially useful goals. Inmates shall be allowed to correspond with families, friends, attorneys, courts and other public officials and organizations so long as such correspondence is in compliance with the Department of Corrections procedures and does not pose a threat to the security of the facility, violate any state or federal law, or violate any U.S. Postal Service regulation.

*In accordance with United States Postal Regulations, **all incoming inmate general correspondence may be opened, searched and may be read by authorized staff.***

On April 17, 2017, the Virginia Department of Corrections will implement additional mailroom security measures aimed at detecting and eliminating contraband in DOC facilities. In institutions classified as Security Level 2 and above, all incoming general offender correspondence items will be photocopied, and only the photocopies will be delivered to the offender.

*The original envelope and all enclosed contents will be shredded in the institutional mailroom once they are photocopied. In addition, **for each mailing, a maximum of three 8 1/2 X 11 inch photocopy pages, front and back, will be delivered to the offender.***

***Inmates may not receive cash, personal checks, postage stamps or prepaid postage envelopes/postcards through incoming mail.** The Department will assume no responsibility for these items mailed to inmates. Approved checks (certified/cashier's checks; Government checks; refund checks from businesses) and money orders shall be removed from incoming mail and credited to the inmate's account.*

Incoming Priority or Express general correspondence is discouraged, however if urgency of a circumstance requires this, the inmate must receive prior written approval from the Warden/Superintendent or designee.

Unauthorized incoming correspondence shall be returned to the post office unopened. If opened, the unauthorized correspondence will be returned directly to the sender if known, with a written explanation for disapproval." (Source: Virginia DOC Webpage)

Visit the Virginia DOC webpage for the mailing addresses of individual institutions:

<http://vadoc.virginia.gov/facilities>

Norfolk City Jail Correspondence Guidelines

Mailing Guidelines

1. All incoming mail must have a return address on it or it will be returned to the post office.
2. All incoming and outgoing mail will be inspected for contraband.
3. All legal mail will be opened and inspected for contraband in the presence of the inmate.
4. All incoming and outgoing mail must contain the inmate's full name and ID#:

Inmate's Full Name and ID#
Norfolk City Jail
811 East City Hall Ave
Norfolk, VA 23510

5. Incoming and outgoing mail may not be bulky or contain anything other than correspondence or documents. Both incoming and outgoing mail that is found to be bulky will be opened and inspected. Items that are contraband will be confiscated, and a letter will be returned to the inmate (outgoing) or returned to sender (incoming).
6. All unauthorized correspondence received from any other correctional facility will be returned to sender. Any requests for correspondence with another inmate must be approved by the Officer in Charge of Corrections or designee.
7. Contraband is not permitted in the facility and will be returned to sender or destroyed. See the section on Contraband for details.
8. **Incoming publications (magazines, books, newspapers) must be sent directly from the publisher."**

Reading materials

"You may subscribe to newspapers, magazines, educational or correspondence materials, and soft-bound books for Norfolk City Jail inmates. **These materials must be received directly from the publisher or bookstore, and must not contain references to violent overthrow of government or any authority under which an inmate is held, drug or gang related material, information relating to the fabrication of weapons or explosive devices, or any sexually explicit material.**

Inmates may have in their possession a total of five pieces of reading material only (i.e. book, magazines, crossword puzzle books, bibles, dictionaries, pamphlets). This also includes items mailed to the inmates from the publisher. **All books must be paperback** – no spiral bindings or hardcovers allowed. Unacceptable items are returned at the expense of the inmate or sender. If the cost of returning the unacceptable items is not paid by either the inmate or the sender, the contraband will be contributed to a non-profit organization or destroyed.

Any correspondence items in question require delivery approval from the Officer in Charge of Corrections."

Items considered "contraband" include:

"All Photos/Pictures

All tobacco products or incendiary items or devices i.e. matches, lighters, etc.

Any packages

Any envelopes over 6×9 inches

Money orders/cash/checks

Stickers

Blank stationery, blank paper, stamps and/or envelopes

Mail sprayed with perfume/cologne, any unknown substance or lipstick

Musical cards, cards with ribbons, stickers, velvet, glitter, plastic or other attachments,

newspaper clippings, pages torn from magazines or books or pop-up cards

Unauthorized correspondence from other facilities, jails, etc.

Magazines and books not sent directly from the publisher

Magazines and/or books containing sexually explicit material, information about the fabrication of weapons or explosive devices, any gang related material, **literature advocating overthrow of government**, whether sent from publisher or citizen

No return address

Gang related material/coded letters

Printed internet pages

Copies of pages from books (copyright material)

Lyrics or sheet music

Calendars/Maps

Envelopes with bubble/insulated wrap

Tattoo stencils/paraphernalia

Other” (Source: Norfolk Sheriff’s Office Website)

Virginia Beach City Jail Correspondence Guidelines

Mailing guidelines

“All inmates will be afforded the same correspondence privileges. There is no limit on the number of letters an inmate may send or receive. Excessive amounts of mail and correspondence will be placed in the inmate’s property and/or mailed at the inmate’s expense. All incoming mail/packages MUST have a Return Address. Those items without a Return Address will be sent back to the US Post Office. All legal mail will be opened and inspected in the presence of the inmate. All other inmate mail is subject to inspection and may be opened and searched prior to delivery. ALL outgoing mail must be addressed properly with NO DRAWINGS OR COLORINGS anywhere on the outside of the envelope.

All mail sent out by inmates must be sealed by the inmate. The inmate’s full return address must be listed on the outside of the envelope. All outgoing mail will be sent daily except Sundays and holidays. The return address is:

**Inmate Name and OMS #
P.O. Box 6098
Virginia Beach, VA 23456**

*** Please note: Any mail sent out by an inmate and returned to this facility for any reason will be given a mail restriction write-up and will then be placed into the inmate’s property box until their release from this facility. Incoming mail will be delivered without undue delay.*

*Inmates will not be allowed to receive publications that violate the U.S. Postal regulations or **advocate violence or rebellion against any government authority**. Calendars, ordering forms with prices, catalogs, brochures, and newspapers more than 3 days accumulated will not be accepted.*

Greeting cards must be no larger than 6” by 9” when fully opened.

Religious material must be provided by a religious organization and screened by the Chaplain.

Any outgoing inmate mail written on any form of VBCC paperwork will be considered contraband and will not be sent through the U.S. Postal Service.

Any other incoming or outgoing mail containing body fluids, liquids, hair or hair extensions will also be

considered contraband and will be destroyed. Any incoming or outgoing mail containing hazardous material will be destroyed.”

Reading materials

“The following list is provided as a guideline for authorized paper materials allowed to be kept in the cell.

Five (5) books (including religious books)

One (1) dictionary

Three (3) newspapers (no more than 3 days old)

Three (3) magazines (no more than 30 days old)

Two (2) writing tablets

Personal papers, religious materials, VBCC materials/receipts, and legal materials/copy of your warrants

Five (5) unframed photographs (no larger than a 4 x 6, no Polaroids)

One (1) photo album (must be purchased through the Caremart website) containing up to 36 pictures (all must be in the photo album)

Addresses and telephone numbers

Writing materials”

Canteen

“All deposits made to the inmate canteen fund must be in the form of a Money Order, Certified Check, or Cashier's Check, and sent in the inmate's name and addressed as follows:

Inmate's Name and OMS #
C/O Virginia Beach Sheriff's Office
Inmate Account
P.O. Box 6186
Virginia Beach, VA 23456

NO MONEY (CASH, CHECK OR MONEY ORDER) WILL BE ACCEPTED THROUGH ANY CONTROL CENTER. Any money orders mailed directly to an inmate will be returned to sender. Money mailed to the VBSO Canteen should not contain any correspondence. Inmate mail will only be accepted via the U.S. Postal Service.” Source: Virginia Beach City Jail Inmate Handbook

Hampton Roads Regional Jail Correspondence Guidelines

Finding or Confirming Inmate Unit and Pod Info:

Choose an inmate, and then call HRRJ's inmate information hotline at (757) 335-6260. You will run through an automated menu prompt in order to find the inmate's unit and pod numbers.

In order, state the following words loudly and clearly, pausing for one or two seconds between each to ensure the prompt is advancing: 1) “Inmate” 2) “Name” 3) “[Inmate's Name]” 4) “Yes” 5) “Location.”

After passing the “location” prompt, you will be given the inmate's unit and pod numbers.

Mail guidelines:

“Inmates are allowed to receive mail from friends and family while detained at the Hampton Roads

Regional Jail. Please adhere to the following mailing instructions and rules:

**INMATE'S NAME
HOUSING UNIT AND POD
HAMPTON ROADS REGIONAL JAIL
P.O. BOX 7609
PORTSMOUTH, VA 23707**

- **All inmate mail will be rejected if it contains cards of any kind (birthday, greeting, holiday etc.), letters written on colored notebook paper (yellow, blue, green etc.) and letters written with a marker or crayon. All letters must be written in either black or blue ink on white paper, no exceptions.**
- Any material which violates postal regulations or contains obscenity, blackmail, contraband, or threats.
- Any material which contains plans of criminal activities, maps, or plots to escape, and **any material which communicates information designed to encourage inmates to disrupt the facility by strikes, riots, fights, racial or religious hatred, or other prohibited acts.**
- The Hampton Roads Regional Jail will not accept items for inmates that are free or incentives for purchasing or receiving publications or other items.
- Only pre-approved packages are accepted.
- Contraband consists of **stamps; envelopes; staples; tape; glitter; glue or any sticky substance; photos or drawings larger than 4x6; sexually explicit photos; stickers or address labels; plastic cards or plastic covered cards; personal checks or cash; blank stationary or blank paper; information about the fabrication of weapons or explosive devices; and magazines, books or newspapers that do not have prior approval.**

Reading materials

"All property items entering the Hampton Roads Regional Jail must have prior approval from the Superintendent or designee before being mailed or brought to the facility. Inmates may receive newspapers, magazines, or soft back books if they are mailed directly from the publisher. Prior approval is required before placing the order. The publication may be denied if it is too big or threatens security. All publications will be checked for contraband." Source: Hampton Roads Regional Jail Inmate Handbook

Other resources

Appendix A: Area of interest survey, Meeting structure outline, Jail contact list, Jail sample letter (coming soon)

Appendix B (Optional): Prisoner organizing primer, IWOC statement of purpose, IWOC bylaws, State and federal prison contact list, IWOC sample letter

For further resources and reading on prisoner rights or abolitionist issues, feel free to ask an IWOC rep!