



KEEPING IN CONTACT

A guide for the family and friends of adults
in the criminal justice system

It is not always easy to keep in contact with a person who is in prison. The expense of travelling to visit, the frustrations of dealing with prison security, and the demands of everyday life can sometimes make staying in contact difficult. However, maintaining family ties can have real benefits both for the prisoner and the family.

Visiting Police Cells & the Melbourne Custody Centre (MCC)

After arrest, defendants may be held in watch houses or cells in certain police stations. These stations are not set up to manage family visits to the cells. Each station may offer different access to visiting and this may be impacted on by current police resources. Check with your local police station as to where your family member may be held and what the visiting hours might be.

The MCC is a police holding cell underneath the Melbourne Magistrates court where defendants may

be held for a maximum of 14 days. Visits must be booked the night before and are held on Wednesdays 6-8pm and Weekends 9-4pm.

Family can drop off clean clothes (if soiled clothes are taken away) and cigarettes in sealed packets. Check with the station or MCC as to when this can occur.

Defendants cannot phone family, however the Salvation Army Chaplains at the Melbourne Magistrates Court can assist communications in some circumstances, phone **9628 7797**. Alternatively, family should request information from solicitors at other times with the consent of the defendant.

Letters and Phone calls

Maintaining family ties during imprisonment have been shown to make prisoners less likely to re-offend. They also may help a prisoner get through parole, improve the whole family's well-being, and help to make the reunion after prison an easier experience.

The separation between a prisoner and their family takes a huge toll on everyone. It is easy for prisoners, family and children to feel isolated, forgotten and unloved. Regular visits, letters and phone calls maintain family connections, remind prisoners that they are more than just an 'offender' and provide opportunities for children to continue their relationship with their parent.

Email

For security reasons, prisoners do not have access to the internet or email.

Letters

Letters are a highly valued form of communication for prisoners. Families need to be aware that for many prisoners, their life is full of routine and repetition, with few new events to report on. As a result, prisoners might not respond to every letter they receive, but they enjoy receiving them and finding out what is going on in the world outside. It is a great way for children to stay in contact when phone calls can be difficult and expensive. They can also send in artwork, make special things for their parent, or play games that require the parent to send something back to them.

Inspection of mail

Letters sent from or received by a prisoner can be inspected and read to ensure they do not contain information or contraband (see page 13) that could jeopardise the safety and security of the prison. For example, plans for criminal activity, plans to escape from prison, threats of blackmail, and any indecent or offensive material will be censored upon inspection. If mail is prevented from reaching a prisoner, the prisoner will be notified, unless it involves a breach of prison security.

Forwarding mail when prisoners are transferred to another prison or hospital

Mail will be forwarded to a prisoner when they are transferred to a different prison.

Mail will also be forwarded to a prisoner when they are likely to be in hospital for more than two days.

Telephone calls

You are not permitted to telephone a prisoner from outside. All phone calls between prisoners and their families must be made by the prisoner, who bears the cost of the call. This will be at STD rates for all long distance calls. This means that while phone calls are extremely important, they can also be very expensive for prisoners, especially when they are located in country Victoria. Prisoners will need to have money in their phone account before they can make a call. *See the Visiting Prison section of this booklet for information on how to place money into the prisoner's phone account.* In order to receive calls from a prisoner you must be on their approved phone list. If you are unsure whether you are on the phone list, you will need to ask the prisoner during a visit or in a letter.

Both sentenced and remand prisoners are allowed to put a maximum of 10 people on their phone list. The prisoner gives the name, address and phone number of each person (one person per household is all that

is required) and prison staff ring the number to confirm that the specified person is happy to receive calls from the prisoner.

When you receive a call from a prisoner you will hear a recorded message which lets you know that someone is calling you from a prison. Telephone calls may be monitored and recorded for prison security purposes and are time limited, although this may vary between prisons. Prisoners cannot make phone calls to mobile telephones. Use of the telephone is considered to be a privilege that can be denied if the prisoner breaches prison rules.

Organising a phone call with your imprisoned relative

It can be a good idea to organise dates and times for the prisoner to call so that you are not waiting around for a phone call. Partners and family members may feel anxious if a prisoner does not call when they said they would. However, it is important to remember that there are few phones and many prisoners, the phones may be busy and hard to access at the times that might suit family.

Furthermore, the prisoner may have had to attend a professional visit, a work appointment or there may have been a lockdown, all of which will prevent the prisoner from making a phone call at the arranged time. It is also possible that they simply forgot.

Avoid the trap of sitting around waiting for hours for a phone call from a prisoner. If they have not called an hour after they said they would, it is best to get on with other things. Don't jump to awful conclusions about why the prisoner has not called. Remember to keep in mind all the factors that could have prevented the prisoner from calling you. However, remember the prisoner will also feel anxious if you are not there to take the call at the agreed time.

In an emergency...

In a genuine emergency that involves a serious situation such as the death, serious injury or illness of a family member, contact the prison and say that you need to pass on an **urgent** message to a prisoner. Your call will probably get put through to the Operations Manager of the prison who will confirm that it really is an emergency and arrange for the message to be passed on.

The prison is required to inform a prisoner as soon as possible after hearing of the death or serious illness of any relative or partner. Where circumstances allow, the prisoner can apply to visit the sick relative or attend the funeral, either under escort or alone.

The General Manager of the prison is required to notify the prisoner's next of kin or emergency contact person upon the serious illness, injury or death of the prisoner, or their removal to an institution for the treatment of mental illness.

Visiting prison

Visitor lists

Prisoners are allowed to nominate up to ten people to put on their visitor list and will need to specify each person's full name, address and date of birth. Visitors under 16 years can accompany an approved, adult visitor. The prisoner's visitor list will then be approved and prison staff will use the list to verify the identity of visitors when they come to prison.

How do I get on a visitor list?

Prisoners are often confused when they come in to prison and may not remember the personal details of the people they want to put on their visitor list. It can be helpful for the prisoner if family members or friends write down the name, address and date of birth of people that they think the prisoner would like to receive visits from. This information can be placed in an envelope with the prisoner's name and Corrections Reference Number (CRN) if known, in the prison mailbox.

The prisoner can make changes to their visitor list. If you would like to be added to a prisoner's visitor list then write a letter with your details to the prisoner and they can choose to put you on their visitor list.

Can I visit someone in prison if I have a criminal conviction?

If you have a Criminal Record Number you must seek prior approval to visit the prisoner by writing a letter to the General Manager of the prison and await written reply. This needs to be done every time the prisoner is moved, as consent is specific to each prison.

What are Special Visits?

Special visits allow people to visit the prisoner outside of normal visiting times. They can be authorised by the General Manager of the prison under certain circumstances. Prisoners may request special visits in circumstances such as:

- Immediately after receiving a sentence, immediately prior to transfer to another prison, denial of parole, death or serious illness in the family, or loss of an appeal.
- To maintain parent/child relationships. A General Manager may permit visits between a prisoner and a prisoner's children (up to 14 years of age) during periods when the prisoner is not eligible to have contact or residential visits.
- If the prisoner is seriously ill, the General Manager will advise the prisoner's nominated next of kin or other emergency contact person to enable a special visit to occur, where appropriate.

How and when to visit

Information for visitors

Most prisons have an 'information for visitors' sheet and a "Schedule of Prison Visiting Times" which you can collect on your initial visit to the prison. This will give you information on visiting times and frequencies allowed for contact and non-contact visits as well as information about prisoner property, money, telephone calls, being searched and travelling to that prison.

**You can also call VACRO Reception on Freecall
1800 049 871 for this information.**

How often and at what times can I visit?

Specific visiting hours and conditions vary between prisons. Some will have separate visit times for different prison groups such as: remand, sentenced, mainstream and protection prisoners.

Bring adequate ID

Whenever you visit a Victorian prison, a total of 100 points of identification is required. Anyone who cannot produce satisfactory ID will not be permitted to enter the prison.

The following forms of identification are acceptable:

100 points	Current drivers licence, Correctional Services pass, Consulate ID card, Valid passport, law card, shooters licence, key pass, police member ID, Ombudsman photo ID
50 points	60+ card, birth certificate, marriage certificate, Australian citizenship certificate, defence department ID, Government authorised U16
25 points	Medicare card, social security card, student card, credit card, bank book (only one of each kind of ID card is accepted)

Confirming the visit

On the day of the visit it is advisable to ring and confirm that the visit can go ahead. Sometimes there may be a 'lockdown' at the prison, which means that prisoners cannot leave their cells. This may be a result of a security risk such as identification of a banned substance inside the prison.

Give the prisoner advance notice that you are coming for a visit as it helps the prisoner to be ready when called out to the visit. This can reduce waiting time and reduce the chance that the prisoner will be involved in a program or another visit when you arrive.

Co-ordinate visits with other family members

As prisoners can only receive a limited number of visits per week, other family members may not be able to visit the prisoner if you have visited earlier in the same week. Try to co-ordinate visits so that the prisoner has the opportunity to have contact with everyone.

Also note that some prisons offer a booking system to enable you to plan your visits better.

You may also be eligible for VACRO's video visits program that offers video linkage visits for family in some prisons. Contact VACRO for more information.

Bringing things into prison

During Your Prison Visit

No item or substance may be directly given to a prisoner by a visitor or to the visitor by the prisoner, without the approval of a prison officer.

Contraband is anything introduced or found in the prison that is not permitted. Prohibited items vary depending on whether the prison is minimum, medium or maximum security. The following items are prohibited in all prisons. This is not a complete list so it is best to ring the prison directly to check what items you can bring for the prisoner.

Contraband items include:

- Drugs and drug related items/paraphernalia
- Alcohol
- Communications devices
- Explosives
- Firearms
- Flammable or corrosive liquids

At Other Times

You can drop **property** off in the front foyer of the prison between 9am and 4pm any day of the week, and it will be forwarded to the prisoner. You may also post items to a prisoner. Contact the prison for a list of property the prisoner is allowed to receive.

Prisoners are entitled to receive a certain amount of money per calendar month. **Monies** may only be received by mail in the form of a bank cheque or money order (no personal cheques accepted). The sender needs to clearly indicate their name and address and identify if it is for the prisoner's canteen or phone account. The canteen account is used by the prisoner to purchase items ranging from shampoo to cigarettes. Monies will not be deposited into the prisoners account if the name and address of the sender is not able to be identified and if the sender is not on the prisoner's approved visit list. Monies enable the prisoner to purchase items from the prison canteen such as cigarettes, soft drinks, toiletries, sporting equipment and hobby items. Prisoners can receive an additional sum of money per month upon written request, for the purpose of phone calls.

Help with travel costs and accommodation

VACRO Rail Ticket Assistance Program

To assist with the cost of visiting a prison, VACRO can provide families with 3 V-Line tickets every 6 weeks.

To be eligible for the program, the family member must:

- Be on the prisoner's visits list, and
- Be visiting a prison in which V-Line travel is required

To access the program:

- You need to call VACRO on the Monday before travel only. It is recommended that you ring as early as possible.
- When collecting tickets, you will need photo identification. Please inform VACRO if this is a problem.

Contact VACRO for further details.

Food

It is recommended that you eat something as close to the time of the visit as possible, as availability of food is limited in many prisons. Some have vending machines and others have a canteen.

Knowing how much money you are allowed to take into the visit, the price of food available and having the correct change will help, especially when children are hungry and anxious. Some minimum security prisons also allow you to bring food stuffs into your visit but check with the relevant prison first.

What to wear

When you visit a prisoner, you must dress in a manner that is deemed 'appropriate' for a public place, in order to be respectful to other visitors. The prison can refuse entry to anyone they deem to be dressed inappropriately. Appropriate dress is hard to define but includes not wearing anything that is see-through, low-cut or otherwise revealing. Overly casual attire, such as thongs and singlets, may also be considered inappropriate.

What you might experience when someone is in prison

For information on how imprisonment may impact you see the following VACRO factsheets:

- ***Living with a family Member in Prison***
- ***Parents of Prisoners***
- ***Partners of Prisoners***
- ***Children of Prisoners***

Prison security procedures

Strip searches

Section 45 of the Corrections Act 1986 enables the General Manager of a prison to order a search and examination of any visitor or any item in the possession of a visitor.

Under certain circumstances where prison officers have reason to believe that a visitor is carrying contraband, the visitor may be asked to undergo a strip search. The prison is required to provide an officer of the same gender as the visitor to perform the strip search when possible. You should be informed about what they want you to do and they require your consent to conduct the search. The search involves several directions, such as “open your mouth”, “remove your clothes”, “shake out your hair”. At no time does a prison officer physically touch a visitor. Visitors have the right to request that someone they know and trust, such as a friend who has come with them for a visit, is present in the room during the search.

If you do not want to be strip searched you can arrange to have a non- contact (box) visit with the prisoner. However, if you have applied to have a contact visit and you refuse to be searched when requested, you may be asked to leave the prison and

you may be banned from visiting for a period of time.

Please note that all prisoners are strip searched before having a contact visit. If you do not want the prisoner to be strip searched, then you should request a non-contact box visit.

Prisoner drug use status

If a prisoner is found guilty of a drug related prison offence (such as a urine test indicating drug use), the prisoner is given a specific Identified Drug User (IDU) status. Depending on the type of drug offence, prisoners will lose their privilege to have contact visits for a specified period.

Prisoners in certain IDU categories are eligible to participate in the Drug- Free Incentive Program (DFIP), where they can reduce their time without contact visits in return for agreeing to extra random urine testing.

Drug Trafficking

No matter how much a prisoner asks you to bring them drugs, DO NOT DO SO. Prisons have highly sophisticated mechanisms for detecting drugs on visitors. If you are found with drugs you will be banned from visiting any prison for twelve months and the police will be called to respond to the incident. The prisoner may also face disciplinary action by prison staff, may lose their privileges or be given a higher security rating and also face further criminal charges.

Sniffer dogs

Drug detector, or 'sniffer', dogs may be brought to the prison car park, waiting areas and visit centre to assess whether visitors are taking drugs into the prison. They can search your car so it is important not to have any contraband in your car.

What happens if a visitor breaches security protocols?

Any visitor who breaches security protocols in a Victorian prison may be banned from visiting any prison for a period of time.

A three month ban may be imposed if you:

- refuse to be searched when requested
- are abusive towards correctional staff, or
- engage in inappropriate behaviour during a visit

A twelve month ban may be imposed if you:

- produce false identification, or
- are caught with drugs, drug paraphernalia or other contraband

NOTE: If you are caught in possession of drugs you **will be** arrested, charged and you may face prison time. If you are convicted of the charge an indefinite ban will be imposed on you from visiting any prison in Victoria.



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