

### Support Letters

- Letters of support from friends and family are a vitally important part of a prisoner's parole packet. However, these need to be carefully crafted, meet certain requirements and be sent to specific locations. This is not the time to plead to let Jimmy or Janey come home and promise they will never be in trouble again. As one parole commissioner said, this is the same family the prisoner had when he/she got in trouble, so just saying they want the prisoner home is not a sign of support.
- Letters sent to the board must be originals, signed, dated and with contact information. If not signed they may not be considered valid.
- Send all letters, as well as confirmation of other support, such as job offers, to the lifer desk at the prison housing the lifer, with copies to the prisoner, to the attorney and to the prisoner's counselor at the prison.
- Form letters, petitions or letters from those who don't really know the prisoner are of little use. The board will often call the letter writers to be sure they did; indeed, write the letter and know something about the inmate. Bogus letters are worse than no letters.
- Try to keep letters to one page and specific as to what support you can offer and for how long you are prepared to offer that support, bullet point for clarity.
- Your letter should address your relationship with the prisoner, how he/she has grown as a person, what impact he/she has had on your life means much in terms of rehabilitation and non-recidivism.
- If the letter is written in a language other than English, provide a translation, but include the original letter also.
- Letters should be written no longer than one year before the parole hearing date.

### What you can offer in support:

- Financial support, specific if possible as to amount and time duration
- Help in obtaining Driver's Licenses, Social Security cards, cars, living arrangements
- Help in securing a job and transportation.
- If the prisoner is eligible to be included on your health insurance policy or if an older prisoner/spouse can receive Social Security spousal benefits from your account.
- Participation with the paroled prisoner in support groups or counseling sessions.

Under new laws passed in the last few years there are several specialized hearings available to inmates, however, the basic question, is this person safe to release into society, remains the same. Regardless if an inmate has a Youth Offender Parole Hearing, an Elderly Parole Hearing or a medical hearing, that basic question is the one that must be answered. There is no free pass or automatic out.

## TIPS ON WRITING A SUPPORT LETTER

Always include the name and CDCR number of the inmate, as well as your name and complete contact information. Support letters should be current—if you did one for an inmate at his/her last hearing, one or more years ago, do a fresh letter, even if nothing has changed. The board looks at the date on letters and is less likely to consider 'stale' documents.

Be specific in the support you can offer: if money, how much and for long; if housing, for how long, if a job, how much the pay will be, full time or part time; if you can help with transportation and/or getting to and from job searches or self-help (AA, etc) meetings.

Speak to the growth and change in mind-set you have seen in the prisoner; the maturity and good decision making now being evidenced. Don't appeal to emotions: "Please let Johnny come home, I know he'll never do anything bad again" is a useless letter.

Explain how you met the inmate; the board wants to be sure you know this person and aren't just writing a letter because someone asked you to. Commissioners can and do stop hearings to go call the person who wrote a support letter, to be sure it actually came from them, that's why your contact information on the letter is important, as it adds authenticity to the letter.

Don't discuss the victims; you can say you've seen the great remorse the prisoner now has for what his actions did, but don't say you know how the victims must feel or that they should forgive. And don't minimize the inmate's crime; if he can face what he did, and he must, to be found suitable, you can face it as well.

It's the quality of the support letters that matters, not the number. Don't ask everyone you know to write a support letter unless they can truly speak to the change in the inmate and have something to offer. A few good letters are better than numerous vague and unsubstantiated ones. And don't do petitions—those are meaningless to the board.

If the letter is in Spanish or a language other than English try to have a translation also—most of the board members are not fluent in Spanish and certainly not in other languages.

If you're writing a letter for a prisoner under SB 261, the Youth Opportunity Parole Hearings, and you knew the person at the time of the crime, speak to your knowledge of what was going on in their life at the time of the crime, and how this affected their young decision making process.

Mail 3 copies of the letter: to the Lifer Desk at the prison where the prisoner is housed; to the prisoner and to his lawyer, if you know the name of the lawyer (inmates usually know who will be representing them). Do not mail to the Parole Board. Leave plenty of time for the letters to be received, processed and included in his file. The copies you mail to the prisoner and the attorney are back-up copies.