

HFP

Humanity for Prisoners

Action with Compassion

Guidelines for visiting a prisoner in the MDOC

Plan ahead

Write or email the inmate to find out when is a good time to visit. Believe it or not, these folks DO have planned activities, such as classes, church services, therapy sessions, choir practice, etc. which they cannot miss.

Be sure your credentials are approved and current

Too many people are turned away or denied visits because they don't have the proper credentials. You are only allowed to visit one inmate in the MDOC unless you are a family member of more than one inmate, have Outreach Volunteer Status or are a clergy member or other professional.

If you have a letter of approval signed by a warden or deputy warden, indicating you are approved to visit the inmate, bring this letter with you in case there is any discrepancy. This is especially important for first visits at ANY MDOC facility. Once you are in their computer system and there is a record of your visit(s), life should get easier.

If you wish to buy food or snacks for the person you are visiting, bring silver coinage, including dollar coins or plan to change paper money in the change machines in the lobby. You are allowed to take up to \$20 in a clear plastic bag, which will be provided to you at the desk or in the pat-down room.

Leave everything in your car, including cell phone, purse, wallet, extra outwear, etc., if you are close enough to the door to not need it. Lock your car. Memorize your license plate number. It is required in the sign-in book, but seldom looked at!

Also memorize the prisoner number of the person you plan to visit (or take it in on a piece of paper).

Dress simply!

Don't wear excessive jewelry or an extra layer, such as a vest or jacket. Dress modestly. Those who don't won't be allowed to visit or may be issued smocks to cover up. Wear shoes and socks which can be taken off and on easily.

Arrive early! If visitation starts at 3:30, arrive at 3:00, to make sure you have adequate time to be processed. If you arrive just before count time, you will be waiting for an hour, at least.

The sign-in book on the front desk asks for name, address, date, signature, license plate number, name of inmate and his/her prisoner number. My experience is that these are almost never looked at. Sometimes, the staff person will ask for your credentials before you finish signing in and it doesn't seem to be a problem.

You will need to present prisoner name and number and your photo ID to the staff person at the front desk. Sometimes this person will be courteous; other times s/he can be arrogant and short-tempered. Nevertheless, it is in your best interests to be patient and respectful.

After being processed at the front desk, you will be asked to take a seat in the waiting area while your inmate is notified of his/her visit. This can take as much as an hour, IF the staff is not terribly efficient or organized, or if the inmate happens to be in an activity, at chow, in the shower, etc. Occasionally, you may be called in just a few minutes.

Visit denied or terminated

A visit can be denied for a variety of reasons. Among them:

- The inmate refuses the visit (s/he doesn't HAVE to have a visit).
- The inmate is being disciplined, perhaps in segregation.
- The inmate is ill.
- The inmate is at a required class or group therapy session.
- You are not dressed appropriately.
- You do not have your proper credentials or ID.
- You have disrespected prison staff.
- You have broken one or more of the visitation rules.

Lockers

You will need to put car keys, any reading materials, coat, etc. into a locker. You must insert two quarters in order to secure the locker. I usually get one "staked out," so that, when I am called, I can quickly close it and grab the key. The key only comes free once the locker is closed and the two quarters have been inserted. Every time you need to unlock or re-lock the locker, it will cost you another 50c.

Security processing

Listen carefully while waiting in the lobby. Sometimes the guards don't speak very loudly or clearly and they may mishear the name you are listening for. If there are a lot of people waiting, I try to sit as close to the security doors as I can so I don't miss the name being called. S/he will not call your name, but will say, "Visitor for ...," using the inmate's name.

You will need to quickly lock up all but your ID, locker key and coin bag.

You will be called into a chamber with sliding doors on both ends. The front door will open, you (and maybe a few others) will enter and the door will close.

You will be asked to set your items in a tray or on a counter. Then, you will pass through a security (scanning) chamber. If you are wearing anything metal or have anything in your pockets, you will be asked to remove the item(s) and go through again.

You will be patted down by a person of your same gender. They will ask you to lift your hair, open your mouth, lift your tongue, etc. You will be asked to take a seat and remove your shoes and socks. (People over a certain age are exempt from this, I believe). Once the guard has checked your shoes and socks, you can put them back on.

Any jewelry will be inventoried. Be sure you show them all jewelry you are wearing. It will be checked again when you depart.

The backs of one of your hands will be stamped or written on with infra-red ink. This will only show up under the special light. This also will be checked when you depart.

You will be issued a visitor badge which must be attached to your clothing in a visible place. You will also be given a paper (pass) authorizing your visit.

Once you've been given these items and have picked up your ID, locker key and money, the rear door will open and you can proceed to the visitor room. Sometimes, you might need to walk down a long hallway. You often aren't escorted and you just have to look around to figure out where you're going.

The door to the visitor room will also be locked. If the guard at the desk inside doesn't see you, tap lightly until s/he does. You will have to listen for a click to know the door is unlocked and then pull it open yourself.

Visiting

Once inside the visitor room, you must proceed to the guard at the desk and present your ID and visitor pass. If your inmate is already waiting, you can simply join him/her. If not, choose a spot where two seats are available and sit down. Occasionally a staff person will assign you to a particular seating spot, but this is exceptional, in my experience.

Wait, wait, wait – it can take 30-45 minutes for your inmate to appear, again depending on the efficiency or attitude of the staff. I've never seen an inmate who wasn't eager to see a visitor (although I'm sure it can happen). The inmates are not usually the ones holding things up.

You can give a hug to an inmate upon arrival and again before departure. However, the staff will censor any on-going touching in most cases. I do think they tend to be more lenient with married couples and parents with children. Just be aware of the attitude and the behavior you observe in others to set the pace.

It's good to establish a time frame for your visit. Let him/her know that you need to leave by a certain time. This way, there is no surprise when the time comes.

You do not need to worry about carrying on a conversation. Usually the inmate is so happy for a visit that s/he will "talk your arm off." If this is not the case, there are some games available. These are helpful for visits with children, too.

There will be numerous vending machines in the visitor room (more revenue for the MDOC!) Inmates are not allowed to walk over to them or make purchases. But you can be quite certain they know what is offered! If you are feeling generous, you could offer a meal or snack. Have one yourself, if you wish. The machines can be tricky, especially the ones with many choices. There is a lever to turn the shelves until you get it to where you can select the item you need to purchase.

There is usually a photographer in the visitor room. Vouchers need to be purchased at the front desk, prior to your visit. You can be photographed with the inmate in front of any number of nice backdrops, such as mountains, beaches, etc. Very realistic!

There are also microwave ovens to heat sandwiches and there are some paper towels, plastic cutlery, condiments, etc. You will need to do all of this for the inmate, since they must remain seated. The bag of change should be visible on the table in front of you. Under no circumstances should you ever try to give money, jewelry or any other item to the inmate. Both of you will be in trouble!

Exiting

Once you decide to leave (or visiting hours are over), you will need to collect your ID and visitor pass from the guard at the desk. The inmate also needs to collect a form and ID. Once you say goodbye, s/he must go and sit in a row of chairs and wait to be escorted back to his/her unit. You will need to stand by the door and again wait for the guard to hit the button to unlock it. Once the door is unlocked, you may exit and find your way back to the security chamber. Now, all you need to do is show your infra-red hand, turn in your visitor pass and badge, have your jewelry inventoried and you will be free to exit.

Don't forget to claim your items from your locker. Of course, you won't get too far without your car keys!

No-No's

No weapons of any kind are allowed anywhere on the prison grounds. Although it is unlikely your car would be searched, if you were found with a weapon, you would be in trouble.

No pets are allowed on the premises, even if locked in your car.

No cameras or cell phones are allowed to be used anywhere on the premises. You may have them in your car, but do not use them and certainly do not bring them into the prison.

Don't bring any outside food or drinks into the prison. There are drinking fountains and vending machines.

Never talk back to the prison staff! Speak clearly and respectfully. If you feel you are being unfairly treated, you can ask a question, make a comment, but do so with respect, not foul language or sarcasm. Disrespect, even when it may seem warranted, will get you nowhere and can cause problems with present or future visits. You may ask to talk to a shift sergeant or superior officer, but you may or may not be accommodated. If you feel you have been wrongly treated or denied a visit that you should have been qualified to have, it is better to go home and write a letter to the warden.

No additional persons are allowed to wait, either in a car parked in the visitor parking lot, nor in the lobby at the prison. If you are dependent upon another person to drive you to the prison, this person will have to find another place to be while you visit. Be sure to establish a time for your driver to return and try not to keep him/her waiting. The driver will not be allowed to "loiter." Tell your driver to return in another 15 minutes, if you aren't out when s/he comes for you.