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# Inside Out: NLG Support For People in Prison & How to Start A Project

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**NLG Mass Incarceration Committee, NLGSF Prisoner Advocacy  
Network, NLG-NYC's Parole Preparation Project, NLG Political  
Prisoner Support Committee**

# Agenda

1. Introductions (5 min)
2. Background on each project, what it does, how to join.
  - a. Mass Incarceration Committee Prison Mail Project (5 min) (Theresa)
  - b. Jailhouse Lawyer's committee (5 min) (Theresa)
  - c. NYC MIC's Parole Preparation Project (5 min)(Mark)
  - d. Political Prisoner Support Committee (5 min)(Susan)
  - e. SF Prisoner Advocacy Network (5 min)(Marie)
3. Discussion: skills needed for prisoner advocacy (10 min)
4. Discussion: tips for supporting incarcerated people (10 min)
5. Discussion: best practices in taking direction from incarcerated people (10 min)
6. Q&A (15 min)

# Presenter Bios

- Marie Levin (NLGSF Prisoner Advocacy Network): is an African American woman, organizer, mentor, minister, and one of the PAN founders. Marie Levin's brother, Sitawa Nantambu Jamaa, was one of the main representatives during California's hunger strikes that challenged conditions in California's Security Housing Units (SHU). She is the co-founder of I Believe Ministries and, with her husband, of Freedom Outreach. She is a member of the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition (PHSS), California Families Against Solitary Confinement (CFASC), and is a speaker who amplifies the voices of prisoners involved in the human rights struggle in California State Prisons. Currently, Marie is working with the National Lawyers Guild to build the Prisoner Advocacy Network (PAN), a panel of lawyers, legal workers, and activists to advocate for individuals experiencing human rights violations in solitary confinement. She is an activist and passionate supporter of the Essie Justice Group. An avid business owner, wife, mother, and grandmother, Marie is a member of the Oakland Alliance and owner of Everlasting Barber Shop and MOMM's Pastries.
- Theresa Squillacote (NLG Jailhouse Lawyer Vice President and Mass Incarceration Committee Prison Mail Project): is currently the NLG Co-VP for Jailhouse Lawyers. She was released from federal prison in 2015 after 18 years of incarceration for espionage charges stemming from an elaborate FBI psychological-based sting operation. While in prison, Theresa became very active in inmate advocacy and sentence reform efforts, which she has continued since her release. She currently works closely with the NLG NO to revitalize and maintain strong organizational connections with the NLG incarcerated membership.

# Presenter Bios

- Mark Shervington (NYC Mass Incarceration Committee Parole Preparation Project) is a New York City native and a former NLG-NYC Parole Preparation Project participant. During his 29-year prison odyssey he earned Paralegal and Legal Research Specialist certifications. As an experienced jailhouse lawyer, Mark was instrumental in, among other things, several successful challenges to the New York State Parole Board's policies, practices, and determinations denying parole to deserving candidates. With the assistance of the NLG-NYC Parole Preparation Project, Mark was finally granted parole in 2015 at his tenth parole release interview. He currently serves as a member of the NLG Parole Preparation Project's Advisory Board and is working with the Project as a Haywood Burns Fellow.
- Susan Rosenberg (NLG Political Prisoner Support Committee) is an author and advocate for social justice who was incarcerated for 16 years, including in the underground High Security Unit at Lexington, Kentucky (now closed). During her time in prison she became a poet, author and AIDS activist. In 2011 Citadel Press published her book, *An American Radical: Political Prisoner in My Own Country*.

# A Note on Language

There is not an agreed upon language use

- Some people agree with or oppose the use of any of these terms:
  - Client
  - Convict
  - Offender
  - Inmates
  - Prisoners
  - Incarcerated People

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join -Mass Incarceration Committee Prison Mail Project

## What it Does

The Mass Incarceration Committee exists in recognition that the use of incarceration in the United States has reached epidemic proportions and is the foremost civil rights, racial justice, and human rights concern of our times. The Committee's mission is to challenge the prison industrial complex in all its forms and advocate for prison abolition and alternatives to incarceration.

The committee answers mail sent to the NLG from people in prison.

<https://www.nlg.org/mass-incarceration-committee>

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join -Mass Incarceration Committee Prison Mail Project

How to Get Involved

Contact: Nora Carroll [carroll.nora@gmail.com](mailto:carroll.nora@gmail.com) / Theresa Squillacote [theresasquillacote@gmail.com](mailto:theresasquillacote@gmail.com)

Tasks You Can Do: Answer prison mail.

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## -Jailhouse Lawyer's Committee

### What it does

- Review correspondence from incarcerated members.
- Identify follow –on, referral to prison mail or more particularized treatment (adding programs to a local facility, sex harassment at another)
- Try to garner issues in common, to extract and prioritize what the members want to focus on.
- Try to stay in tune with the NEC and identify where the organization's work as a whole may impact incarcerated members, either positively or not, and work to integrate the interests of the incarcerated members into the org as a whole (e.g. receipt of printed pubs, crossover w other committee (environmental))



# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## -Jailhouse Lawyer's Committee

### How to Get Involved

- Contact Information: Theresa Squillacote [theresasquillacote@gmail.com](mailto:theresasquillacote@gmail.com)
- Tasks you can do: Answer prison mail. Get JHL member work published in Guild Notes.

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## -Background NYC MIC's Parole Preparation Project

The Parole Preparation Project of the NLG-NYC seeks to end mass incarceration by collaborating with and informally advocating for the release of people serving life sentences in New York State prisons to parole. Project volunteers may also challenge the unjust practices of the New York State Board of Parole through movement-building toward policy reform. The Parole Preparation Project does not provide attorney representation.

<https://www.facebook.com/ParolePrepProject/>

# -NYC MIC's Parole Preparation Project

## What It Does

- The Parole Preparation Project (“PPP”) collaborates with and advocates for people eligible for parole serving life sentences in New York State prisons. PPP does not form attorney-client relationships.
- PPP volunteers work closely with an incarcerated person who has an upcoming parole board hearing. Often the parole applicants we work with have been repeatedly, unlawfully denied release. Usually volunteers work in groups of 2-3.
- PPP supports the development of solid release plans, compelling parole advocacy packets, and necessary interviewing skills.
- PPP volunteers really get to know the applicants through communication (letters, calls, visits) over a period of 6-12 months. Volunteers also attend monthly volunteer meetings.
- PPP also developed a self-help guide that we send to prisons, and we are working on a self-help guide for parole denial appeals.

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## -NYC MIC's Parole Preparation Project

How to Get Involved

Contact: Michelle Lewin [mlewin12@gmail.com](mailto:mlewin12@gmail.com) or Nora Carroll [carroll.nora@gmail.com](mailto:carroll.nora@gmail.com)

Tasks You Can Do: Get trained and paired to advocate for someone in a parole hearing (NYC only). Administrative and fundraising support.

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## ~~What It Does~~ Political Prisoner Support Committee

- There are many political prisoners in the US. Some, such as Jalil Muntaqim and Herman Bell held here in NY are some of the longest held in the world.
- Goal: The National Lawyers Guild Political Prisoner Support Committee's goal is to create a network of lawyers, legal workers, and law students committed to providing effective legal support for U.S. held political prisoners.
- What It Does: This Committee aims to connect each prisoner with a Guild member (lawyer, law student or legal worker) who lives nearby and who can work with the prisoner's existing support team (if there is one.) The NLG member will coordinate legal support such as, for example, representation at parole hearings or representation to ensure proper medical care. Our ultimate goal of course is to see them recognized and freed!

<https://www.nlg.org/political-prisoner-support-committee>

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## -Political Prisoner Support Committee

### How to Get Involved:

- Contact Information: Susan Rosenberg [srmanny1@gmail.com](mailto:srmanny1@gmail.com)
- Tasks You Can Do:

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## -SF Prisoner Advocacy Network

**Who We Are:** The NLG started this group from our Police and Prisons Committee. It is made up of lawyers, legal workers, family members who are activists on the outside, activists, political activists on the inside, formerly incarcerated people, and law students.

**Who We Support:** We support people in the security housing units. We work in solitary confinement and similar conditions of isolation such as administrative segregation, and gender-based segregation. They must be activists or jailhouse lawyers. We are supporting people who are targeted and reach out to us because they are experiencing retaliation.

**What We Do:** Focus on responding to correspondent (client) in a timely fashion for their needs. We write letters. If there are medical issues we look into the medical concerns and records. Example: If someone experiences sleep deprivation. Get consent for taking actions and being aware of retaliation.

# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## -SF Prisoner Advocacy Network

**What An Advocate Does.** Tasks include mail correspondence with people inside, phone calls and letters to prison and health-care officials, assisting with filing administrative appeals, filing complaints, providing resources from the web or other sources, and public records requests.

**How Advocates Are Supported:** The NLGSF office administers the program. Staff will coordinate intake forms and advocate matching, mail, provision of educational and technical resources/guides, training and templates. Attorneys experienced with prisoners' rights and litigation will be available as mentors.

<http://www.nlgsf.org/prisoner-advocacy-network>



# Background on Each Project, What It Does, How To Join

## -SF Prisoner Advocacy Network

How to Get Involved:

The Volunteer Commitment: 1 year or until the issue is resolved. Whichever shorter. Fill out this form <http://www.nlgsf.org/form/prisoner-advocacy-network-volunteer-form>, attend a 3-hour training, and provide a confidentiality agreement.

Contact: [PAN@nlgsf.org](mailto:PAN@nlgsf.org) if you are interested.

Tasks you can do: Fundraising, administrative work, or get trained as an advocate and paired with someone in solitary.

# Skills Needed for Prisoner Advocacy

- Communication skills. Especially listening skills. Down to earth delivery. Avoid language that can seem pretentious.
- Body language, tone, or writing that conveys patience.
- Realize when you are assuming things, and try not to assume.
- Research and investigation:
  - Ability to help someone figure out what they need. Be able to find what they need.
  - Understand what assumptions and experiences people are working with.
  - Understand people may not understand how new technologies work (computers, internet, legal research programs).
- Diplomacy. Show the correct information without putting someone down. Don't make it personal. Sometimes people believe things to be true that aren't, and you must figure out a way to gently show them the proof of what is more accurate to help them understand.

# Skills Needed for Prisoner Advocacy

- Helping people understand what is realistic. Wishful thinking is a powerful thing, it is delicate to dispel that information.
- Be creative in helping people solve problems. Help redirect toward realistic goals and accomplishable tasks.
- Don't be limited to thinking only for litigation or formal "case" based solutions. Help brainstorm activities.
- Also, need to be committed, to have a heart and do the emotional work, and not just bring skills.
- Relate as a whole person and as mature adults, more than just in a volunteer role. This can decrease the distance between cultures and backgrounds, and help with sharing information more easily.

# Skills Needed for Prisoner Advocacy

- Be ready to challenge preconceptions and assumptions.
- Directness. If you think someone isn't giving you accurate information, be direct without being accusatory. Don't accuse someone of lying, or being a liar, but ask them for the truth.
- Flexibility: sometimes what you set out to work on may take a backseat to something more immediate (a new infraction, a problem with the mail, a medical issue, etc).

# Tips for Supporting Incarcerated People

Clarity. Make sure they know you, who you are, what you can offer, and that you are or are not their attorney.

Boundaries. People, esp long termers, are lonely. Often their family and friends have left them behind long ago. They may be ecstatic at the idea that someone is responding to them. The trick is to be supportive and caring while at the same time not creating a dependency that will suck up your time and energy.

Filter. People have the capacity to become extremely well-educated and to make a real contribution to legal work in their own case and to policy needs overall. Conversely, often people a) hear a lot of trash and are often unable to weed out valid information, and b) convince themselves that, because they know a little, they know a lot. For example, “I can read a case therefore I understand legal analysis.” One common thread of misinformation: “the commonwealth states don’t follow federal law.” “If the flag in your courtroom had yellow fringe on it, your sentence is invalid.” “I have a medical/family crisis and the judge can change my sentence if I tell him about it.” Finality of judgment is an extremely hard concept to explain to an people.

Basics. Don’t assume that anyone has basic civics knowledge, eg, three branches of government, law v. regulation, how a law is made, what a judge can or cannot do. Often I found myself explaining very, very basic things. The trick was to do so (a) without condescending, (b) in an understandable fashion, and (c) without assuming it was always required. Do not talk like a lawyer or professional. Talk like someone at the grocery store. It can be very challenging to explain a difficult concept in simple, basic terms.

# Tips for Supporting Incarcerated People

- State why you are there: Volunteer or Paid? Personal Experience?
- Make the scope of your advocacy clear. Make the expectations of what you are or are not offering clear. Make your role clear.
- Be prepared. Do background research on person you are working with, what are authorities like in the prison, what is the housing like (disciplinary, administrative segregation, medical), what you can or can't bring on a visit, get a confirmation letter before you go on a visit, what is the contact information for officials in case anything happens.
- Be organized. Keep clear files.
- Wait for someone to offer information about their commitment offense and release date, let them decide if they want to unless it is relevant to your advocacy for them.
- Advocate can be so into wanting to be sensitive that can forget that it is ok to interact, you don't always have to be deferential to be creative and effective.

# Best Practices for Supported Incarcerated People

- Act naturally, don't try to act overly professional.
- Educate without coming across like you are educating.
- Listen!
- Don't over promise.
- Take their ideas first, mesh it with yours, then share again.  
Constant feedback loop.

# Best Practices In Taking Direction From Incarcerated People

- Active listening. This may mean something different in prison.
- Let people speak and take the time they need. They might not have the vocabulary to express everything without you asking them questions. Help them frame their thoughts and ideas more coherently.
- Get consent to talk about specific things - use language to open up that such as “is it ok if I ask you this.”
- Guidance on personal safety risks. People know they are at risk and what they are at risk of. Ask them about what you don’t know. Get their input on what different strategies or language have what consequences for them. There are many values and consequences that aren’t written in the rulebooks in terms of how people inside deal with problems.



# Best Practices In Taking Direction From Incarcerated People

- Understand that norms on the inside (economies, values, things you can and can't do) aren't intuitive for people outside or without experience in understanding the culture. Ask to be educated about it.
- Check with person before sending letters or documents on their behalf. Send them drafts.
- If someone will suffer a consequence on the inside, try to understand that before you think you know what is best to help them, as you don't live the consequence.

# Q&A

# Online Resources From Our Projects

# Support from The Outside: Overview

This training will be the first in a series. It will focus on practical skills development for activists, legal workers, and lawyers to understand the nitty gritty methods and best practices for supporting and advocating for people inside prisons. Trainers include formerly incarcerated people and family members, legal workers, activists, and attorneys. We plan to read training materials prepared by currently incarcerated people. The training will be structured to benefit people already plugged in to this work, as well as to prepare participants to hit the ground running with volunteer opportunities offered by the programs present at the training (Human Rights Pen Pal Program offering correspondence, California Prison Focus offering legal visits to Corcoran and Pelican Bay SHUs, and the Advocacy Network program advocating for people in solitary). Learn nuts and bolts of: confidentiality, correspondence, visits, records requests, and re-entry. Learn about basic rights (conditions, medical, staff conduct, etc.) and potential remedies within and external to CDCR. Note: While some of the content is California or federal system specific, most is generalizable to other states.

**<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/13iKlwinb6O31aVub7VU1LypaeBFly5SqC8UyNI5syZQ/edit>**

## Legal and Family/Social Visits

Panelists will teach participants about how to conduct legal visits and family/social visits.

Materials here

<https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Visiting-Incarcerated-people1.pdf>

# **CDCR Records; How to request, read, and utilize prison C-File, medical, and other records.**

Panelists will teach participants why it is important to request records and how to interpret these confusing files for medical advocacy, conditions advocacy, parole and re-sentencing, and other purposes participants bring forward.

Training materials here <https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/support/>

# **Challenges to Getting Appropriate Medical or Mental Health Care On The Inside: Tools For More Effective Advocacy and Better Outcomes for Incarcerated People and Supporters On The Outside**

This training will teach participants the legal rights of incarcerated people with medical or mental health needs. The trainer(s) will focus on strategies to advocate for better treatment, including evaluations, medications, and emergency care, for individuals in jails and prisons. Examples will be drawn from experiences with individual and systemic legal advocacy.

Training materials here <https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/support/>

# Writing Advocacy Letters for Medical Care, Mental Health Care, and Disability Accommodations

- Write effective advocacy letters with the goal of obtaining medical or mental health care, or disability accommodation.
- Use medical and c-file records.
- Perform and incorporate basic research on medical, mental health, and disability issues, as well as how to find and use experts.
- Pursue strategies once the internal grievance process is completed.
- Identify whether people are class members in existing class action suits, and how to connect with attorneys monitoring treatment of class members.

Training materials here <https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/support/>



# **Challenges to Getting Appropriate Medical or Mental Health Care On The Inside: Tools For More Effective Advocacy and Better Outcomes for Incarcerated People and Supporters On The Outside**

This training will teach participants the legal rights of incarcerated people with medical or mental health needs. The trainer(s) will focus on strategies to advocate for better treatment, including evaluations, medications, and emergency care, for individuals in jails and prisons. Examples will be drawn from experiences with individual and systemic legal advocacy.

Training materials here <https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/support/>

## **Medical and conditions advocacy for transgender people detained or incarcerated in the federal system.**

Training materials here

<https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/NLG-Trans-Prisoner-Advocacy-workshop-2.pdf>

# CDCR Appeals Process

People in prison are often required to exhaust internal, administrative complaint processes before they can take a case to court. In California, non-lawyers and lawyers can be a huge help to people with their complaints against the prison system. Learn how to assist people incarcerated in California with their administrative appeals in this session led by Sajad Shakoor of the Tayba Foundation.

Materials here

[https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/APPEAL-PROCESS-WORKSHOP-PRESENTATION\\_SAJAD.docx](https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/APPEAL-PROCESS-WORKSHOP-PRESENTATION_SAJAD.docx)

# Meeting People Where They're At

This training will teach participants how to be conscious of the experiences and conditions incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people face, in order to improve participants' advocacy. Trainers will focus on methods to increase mindfulness and improve relationship building and advocacy skills during phone calls, correspondence, visits, and other support activities. Examples will be drawn from experiences at CDCR Women's facilities.

Training materials <https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/3.31.15-Meeting-People-Where-Theyre-At-Printed.pdf>

# **Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue for Advocates of People Incarcerated in the SHU/Solitary/Segregation**

This training will be an opportunity to explore compassion fatigue. What is it? How does it affect us? How does it impact the work we are trying to do? As we learn about some of the psychology of compassion fatigue, participants will also have the opportunity to talk about their personal experiences, build on their own knowledge and tell their stories in ways that help them heal.

Training materials here <https://caitlinkellyhenry.com/support/>