



PRISON VISITATION GUIDELINES

Overview

The Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers (CIIC) is a national umbrella group for all of the Irish Immigration Centers in the US. The CIIC was established in 1996 to promote the welfare of Irish immigrants in the US at a national level.

The mission of the CIIC is to represent immigrant organizations throughout the United States who are committed to providing services to Irish immigrants. The Coalition provides support and assistance to the various centers in their work through advocacy, education and the exchange of information. CIIC member organizations are located in California, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Philadelphia, Washington and Wisconsin.

Each center provides their own unique array of services, outreach and assistance to immigrants. They offer safe and reliable places where Irish and immigrants of other nationalities can get information and referrals on a variety of issues including; employment, immigration, citizenship, programs for seniors, counseling, substance abuse, outreach, housing and returning to Ireland. All services are provided in a safe, friendly, confidential and professional atmosphere.

The CIIC acts as an information clearinghouse and assists the work of our members through advocacy, training and sharing best practices. The CIIC and the member centers are a strong voice for the needs of Irish Immigrants and an advocate for fair and just immigration legislation for all immigrants to the US

Background

The CIIC's Detention Sub-Committee is made up CIIC member centers, the Irish Apostolate USA (IAUSA) and the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO). It developed these Prison Visitation Guidelines as the first step in examining the development of a Prison Visitation Program. The information was collated from a number of resources but special mention must be given to the ICPO who provided the bulk of the information.

Guidelines

Due to the nature of the U.S. justice system there are many different kinds of prisons throughout the U.S.

Jails generally remand facilities or for less serious crimes

State Prisons for more serious crimes that were prosecuted in state courts

Federal Prisons for a range of crimes that were prosecuted in federal courts also sometimes used as remand centres for people accused of federal crimes

This means that unlike in most European countries there are a wide variety of different prison systems. Every prison system will have its own rules on prison visitation and some prison systems (for example the Federal Bureau of Prisons) require that prison visitors be approved in advance and submit to a criminal record check.

Most prison systems have websites- for example New York- www.docs.state.ny.us or the Federal Bureau of Prisons- www.bop.gov which provide information on how to visit a prisoner. Usually this will include information on how to apply for permission to visit a prisoner, how to dress when visiting a prisoner and whether or not any items can be left for a prisoner.

If there are problems making arrangements, CIIC, ICPO and Consulate staff are happy to assist.

There is a Volunteer Coordinator assigned to each prison. They will have the rules of the prisons and guidelines for volunteers specific to their prison. It is important that volunteers meet with this person and adhere to the rules and follow the guidelines of the prison

Role of the Prison Visitor

1. Listening

Prisoners like other people want to talk about their lives and problems to someone who is not going to judge them or try to offer simplistic pat solutions. Listening is a skill but it is a skill that can be developed. It is important to allow the prisoner to air their grievances without necessarily taking the prisoner's side or openly sympathizing with the prisoner. A prisoner needs to approach their imprisonment realistically and encouraging a prisoner to feel aggrieved will not help the prisoner deal with problems within the prison.

2. Show Interest

Sometimes prisoners will want to talk about life in prison and their day to day frustrations. But sometimes it is helpful to encourage them to talk about other things such as their interests, their families, their views. For a prisoner to be able to talk about such things is often a novelty.

Irish prisoners may want to talk about Ireland. If the prison allows it they may appreciate Irish newspapers if available or publications like the [Irish Voice](#) or the [Irish Echo](#).

3. Maintain Realistic Expectations

A visitor should not make promises he or she cannot keep. It is better to tell a prisoner that you cannot do something rather than promise something that you cannot deliver. Otherwise trust that has taken a while to be built up will be lost. In this context a visitor should remember that he or she is not a substitute for the prisoner's lawyer or consular official. If the prisoner makes complaints that would be more appropriately handled by a lawyer or consular official, remind the prisoner that these individuals are better placed to handle these issues.

If a visitor makes a commitment to visit on a certain date, this commitment should be honoured if at all possible. If the visitor is not able to visit on that date, the reason for this should be explained to the prisoner beforehand or if not as soon as possible after the scheduled visit.

4. Acting as a Link Between the Prisoner and the Outside World

Sometimes a visitor will be asked by a prisoner to pass on messages to someone on the outside. Generally a visitor should be wary of making direct contact with a prisoner's family unless the family has expressly agreed to this. Sometimes family relationships have broken down and the prisoner's family may not want contact with the prisoner. A prison visitor should respect the family's wishes.

However it may be appropriate for a visitor to contact either the appropriate Consulate or ICPO if requested to do so by the prisoner.

5. Confidentiality

In order to maintain trust, the prisoner must know that what he or she has said to the visitor will not be passed on to other prisoners, prison authorities, the Consulate or the ICPO unless the prisoner has explicitly requested that such information be passed on. When in doubt about whether or not the prisoner wants what they have said to be passed on, check directly with the prisoner.

Qualities of a Good Prison Visitor

1. The ability to listen

During the first few visits a visitor may be called upon to do little except listen. Remember for the prisoner this may be the first time in a long time that they have had the luxury of just being able to talk freely to someone who is not a fellow prisoner or a guard.

2. Non-judgemental attitude

Prisoners may be incarcerated for crimes like murder, serious assault or sex crimes. Whatever their personal views of such crimes, a prison visitor needs to be able to keep those views to themselves. The prisoner has already been judged and condemned. It is not helpful to a prisoner to be lectured or preached to as many prisoners are already filled with guilt and self-loathing over the crime and the position they have placed themselves and their families.

- 3. Recognition of one's own limitations to solve problems for a prisoner**
Prison systems are inherently rigid and bureaucratic. Security is the paramount concern in a prison regime. This means that many issues a prisoner presents cannot be dealt with by a visitor. A prison visitor should be very clear about what they can and cannot do for a prisoner and be able to communicate that clearly to the prisoner.
- 4. Common sense and a good sense of humour**
These are the qualities to which prisoners will respond and will help to build up rapport.
- 5. Recognition that the visit is for the prisoner not the prison visitor**
Prison visits can be deeply rewarding for prison visitors but the visitor should not be trying to meet their own needs through the visit. Appropriate boundaries must be maintained at all times.

These qualities rather than any specialised knowledge of the law, penal systems etc make for a good prison visitor.

Topics of Conversation

1. Prison Life

Some prisoners will just need an opportunity to complain about conditions in prison and the frustrations they may feel with the legal system etc. It is important, however, that the visitor avoid a situation where the prisoner feels that the visitor is siding with him or her against an "unfair" prison system or an "unjust" legal system. The visitor should make it clear that he or she is not in a position to sort out the prisoner's complaints although they may offer to pass on such complaints to the prisoner's lawyer or consular officer.

2. Family and Friends

Other prisoners will want to talk about their families and friends. They may be experiencing a sense of hurt and rejection or they may be buoyed by the support they have received from their loved ones. Either way the prisoner may wish to discuss these feelings. However in some instances discussing families may be too painful for the prisoner and if they do not want to discuss their families this should be respected.

3. Prisoner's Interests

Some prisoners have keen interests in art or spirituality for example. Sometimes prison life has given them the opportunity to be exposed to interests they might not have otherwise pursued. For example many ICPO clients develop an interest in learning Irish. Although there is naturally no obligation on the visitor to share these interests, the prisoner will appreciate an opportunity to talk about these interests.

4. The Prisoner's Offence

Visitors should not ask about a prisoner's offence. A prisoner may never want to discuss the offence and this should be respected. However over time the prisoner may come to trust the visitor and bring up the offence themselves. Then it is important for the visitor to remain non-judgemental and continue to distinguish between the prisoner and the offence.

5. Personal Beliefs

Like all of us prisoners may hold strong beliefs about religion or politics. Although the visitor may disagree with the prisoner's beliefs, disagreement should be expressed in a respectful way. Visitors with strongly held religious beliefs should be careful not to preach to the prisoner or otherwise try to impose their beliefs on the prisoner. Dialogue builds rapport with the prisoner where sermonizing may alienate the prisoner.

Other Important Elements of Prison Visitation

1. Respect for Prison Rules

Prison rules may seem unnecessarily harsh or bureaucratic. Nevertheless it is important for a visitor to comply with these rules. Do not take anything out of the prison at the prisoner's request if the prison rules prohibit this. Conversely don't bring in items that are forbidden by prison rules. Most prison system websites will list rules for prison visitors and the Volunteer Coordinator in the prison will also probably discuss this with visitors. **A breach of the rules by a visitor can have serious consequences for the prisoner and for other prisoners and their visitors.** For example the prison could place restrictions on the prisoner's other visitors or implement stricter rules on all visitors.

2. Courtesy

Prison officials can often come across as brusque or arbitrary. Despite this a prison visitor should make every effort to be courteous. The visitor should remember that while he or she will leave at the end of the visit, the prisoner stays behind. A prison visitor should say or do nothing that might cause problems for the prisoner after the visit. However if a visitor has serious concerns about the prisoner's treatment- for example an allegation that a prisoner is being denied necessary medical treatment or being abused in prison, the visitor with the prisoner's consent should contact the relevant Irish Consulate in the U.S.

3. Boundaries

Remember that the visit is for the prisoner. Visitors should not be attempting to meet their own needs through the visit. However much a visitor might empathise with a prisoner, it is important to remember that there are two sides to every story and the visitor is only hearing the prisoner's side.

CIIC strongly recommends that visitors do not give out their addresses or phone numbers to prisoners. If the prisoner wants to correspond with the visitor they

could do so through the local Irish centre or through CIIC or the ICPO. Likewise it is not appropriate for a visitor to give their details to a prisoner's family. The prisoner may have been convicted of a serious offence and the visitor should remember this at all times.

Irish Embassy and Irish Consulates in the U.S.

It may be very helpful to consular staff if they know that a prisoner is receiving visits. Although the Consulates cannot give out legal advice or intervene so that an Irish prisoner is treated in a preferential way, they can monitor a prisoner's treatment to ensure that the prisoner is treated in a humane manner and in compliance with the law.

The Consulates in the United States cover different states. So for example the Consulate in Chicago will not be the appropriate consulate to contact with concerns about someone imprisoned in New York State. The following is a breakdown of which Consulates are responsible for which states.

1. The Embassy of Ireland
2234 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC
20008-2849
Telephone- (202) 462-3939
Fax- (202) 232-5993
Website- www.embassyofireland.org

The Embassy offers consular services to Irish people in the District of Columbia (Washington, DC) and the states of Virginia and Maryland.

2. Consulate General of Ireland
Ireland House
345 Park Avenue, 17th Floor
New York, New York, 10154-0037
Telephone- (212) 319-2555
Fax- (212) 980-9475
Website- www.consulateofirelandnewyork.org

The Consulate General in New York offers consular services to Irish people in the states of New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

3. Consulate General of Ireland
535 Boylston Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02116
Telephone- (617) 267-9330
Fax- (617) 267-6375
Website- www.consulateofirelandboston.org

The Consulate General in Boston offers consular services to Irish people in the states of Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and Rhode Island.

4. Consulate General of Ireland
400 North Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611
Telephone- (312) 337-1868
Fax- (312) 337-1954
Website- www.irishconsulate.org

The Consulate General in Chicago offers consular services to Irish people in the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin.

5. Consulate General of Ireland
100 Pine Street, Suite 3350
San Francisco, California 94111
Telephone- (415) 392-4214
Fax- (415) 392-0885
Website- www.irishconsulateofsanfrancisco.org

The Consulate General in San Francisco offers consular services to Irish people in the states of Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Alaska and Hawaii.

The CIIC member centers are always available to advise and assist. They can be contacted through the CIIC. Contact details of the CIIC are as follows:

Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers
PO Box 653
Mount Vernon, NY 10552
Tel- (914) 837-2007
Email- info@ciic-usa.org
Website- www.ciic-usa.org

ICPO is also available to advise and assist Irish prisoners in the U.S. and their families. CPO contact details are:

ICPO
Columba Centre
Maynooth,
County Kildare
Ireland
Telephone- +353 01 505- 3156
Fax- +353 01 601 601-6401
Email- icpo@iecon.ie