

HUMAN RIGHTS PEN PALS

(September, 2014)

OUR VISION

We envision a world without prisons and an end to all forms of torture, including solitary confinement in California.

OUR MISSION

Human Rights Pen Pals is a grassroots, racial justice community organization, in solidarity with people in California's solitary confinement cells. Through letter writing and community organizing, we promote principled, mutually educational relationships between people in solitary confinement and human rights supporters outside the prison walls.

OUR VALUES

- * We believe that all human beings have human rights.
- * We believe that a movement to build a world where prisons are not necessary must center the experience and expertise of those most affected by the prison system: currently incarcerated people, family members and loved ones, formerly incarcerated people, youth and young adults in communities from which most future prisoners in California come, and their long term allies.
- * We believe that demonstrating love and respect for one another in our work is critical and just as important as the actual accomplishments of our work.
- * We believe that the work of community pen pals may entail not only letter writing, but also political education, advocacy, community organizing, alliance building and mutual support.
- * We believe that respectful, mutually educational relationship-building between imprisoned and community pen pals is a powerful motivation for inspiring community activists to become long-term organizers, committed to dismantling the prison industrial complex.
- * We believe that the power of pen and paper can transcend prison walls.

OUR GOALS

- * Amplify the voices of people enduring and resisting torture in solitary confinement cells, including the historic 'Agreement to End Hostilities.'
- * Support the 5 core demands of the hunger strike participants of 2011 and 2013.
- * Work for an end to the systems of 'gang validation' and 'security threat group' validation which CDCr uses to place people in indefinite solitary confinement.
- * Help build a grassroots movement for the human rights of imprisoned people based on the voices of those most affected by the prison system.
- * Promote community based alternatives to violence.

OUR HISTORY

Human Rights Pen Pals began in the spring of 2013 as a project of the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition (PHSS). PHSS is a Bay Area-based coalition, whose overall goals are to amplify the voices of California people imprisoned in long-term solitary confinement; and to win the Five Core demands of the hunger strikers, who have initiated three major hunger strikes in 2011 and 2013, the most recent one involving 30,000 people incarcerated in California prisons.

The Pen Pal program started with two workshops in the Bay Area, with a total of about 25 community pen pals, each 'matched' with one or more imprisoned pen pals, all of whom were hunger strikers. After the 2013 hunger strike, we received numerous requests from community supporters throughout the country to be 'matched' with an imprisoned pen pal. As of September, 2014, we now have approximately 100 'matched' community pen pals; but we also have a large waiting list of imprisoned pen pals seeking a community pen pal with whom to correspond.

OUR STRATEGIES

- * Prioritize accountable, long term sustainable commitment, grounded in love.
- * Practice 'Each One Reach One, Each One Teach One' organizing to bring more community pen pals into our work.
- * Practice grassroots alliance building with people and organizations most impacted by the prison system.
- * Create 'reach out' materials that highlight the humanity of those most affected by the prison system.

OUR COMMITTEES/WORK AREAS

Internal Organizing

The Internal Organizing Committee coordinates various internal functioning aspects of the Pen Pal program. Examples of its work include: matching community and imprisoned pen pals; using our list serve to keep community pen pals in touch with each other and with updates on the struggle against solidarity confinement; and reaching out to, educating, and supporting new volunteers.

Advocacy Committee

The Advocacy Committee utilizes our resources outside the walls, individually and collectively, to support the survival and resistance of our imprisoned pen pals.

Examples of advocacy may include: sending our pen pals stamps, contacting the warden when they are not receiving our mail, assisting our pen pals when they wish to file '602' complaints, fighting to support incarcerated peoples' right to read and to communicate with the outside world; and coordinating an Emergency Response Network to challenge major prison and CDCr human rights violations.

Communications Committee

The Communications Committee will be responsible for creating and maintaining the HRPP website, updating and maintaining materials, sharing training information with the larger list-serve, sharing updates on social media, working with conventional media as needed, setting up and encouraging active blogging by pen pals, and creative projects that help create greater public awareness of solitary confinement issues.

Some examples of our work are: working with other committees to produce materials, coordinating with a graphic designer and a web technician to set up and maintain the website, and a traveling altar with photos and statements to the world of people in solitary confinement.

Base Building Committee

The focus of the Base Building Committee will be to grow the number of dedicated pen pals and activists outside the walls who are committed to the mission of Human Rights Pen Pals.

Examples of base building include: encouraging all community pen pals to sign a pledge to reach and sign up 3 new pen pals per year; coordinating educational conference calls for pen pals to build their skills and knowledge about dismantling the prison system; attending conferences and events to outreach about the Human Rights Pen Pals, and encourage new people to sign up; and hosting semi-regular in-person events for local pen pals to build community and relationship in their pen pal work.

Alliance Building

The Alliance Building Committee will prioritize building principled relationships with people in organizations most impacted by the California prison complex in general, the systems of solitary confinement in particular; and their long term advocates and allies.

These organizations might include, but not be limited to: formerly incarcerated people; family members and loved ones of people in prison; students, educators and community organizations challenging the prison system; students, youth, young adults and educators potentially impacted by the 'school-to-prison pipeline.'