



## MAX Prison and Jail Ministry

### Qualities of a Good Volunteer in Corrections

People from all walks of life can be good volunteers. We need level-headed people who are willing to share their faith, training and experience with inmates. Below are some important qualities.

**Be Ethical** | Matthew 7:12 "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you."

Being ethical is more than following rules. It is a way of life. Being ethical means treating everyone with respect. Ethical living means having nothing to hide. It means always doing what's right.

**Be a Good Listener** | Matthew 25:36 "I was a prisoner and you came to visit me."

Inmates need someone who really cares, just like you and I do. Truly listening to them gives them value and helps their self-esteem. Inmates will often say a lot to mask their reality. The more we listen, the more we can get to the truth of their issues and may be able to help.

**Be Empathetic, but Not Gullible** | Ephesians 13:3 "Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves."

Empathy, like listening, shows you care and are trying to understand the other person's view. We truly are not good volunteers if we don't try to understand the inmate's world from his perspective. Empathy does not mean agreeing with or believing everything you are told. You can listen without over identifying.

**Be Genuine** | Ephesians 4:32 "Be kind to one another, compassionate forgiving one another as God has forgiven you."

You should be yourself and also be a "straight talker". You should be able to tell an inmate your true feelings with tact, while still being empathetic of their view. Never talk around the issue, be clear. Also be willing to be respectfully confronted without becoming negative.

**Be Patient** | Romans 12:12 "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."

There are many things that happen often in a correctional setting that could be frustrating, especially to a volunteer who may not be "in the loop". Things like a fight, someone unaccounted for, or any number of other issues can affect your access, or the timing of your access, into the facility for instance. Furthermore, the people who work in the institution are also just people. Mistakes happen; paperwork doesn't get communicated, etc. A good volunteer will understand the first and foremost obligation of the facility is security and will be willing to roll with the punches (so to speak).

**Be Trustworthy** | 1 Cor 4:2 "Now it is of course required of stewards that they be found trustworthy."

Inmates will test your trustworthiness. Never promise anything you can't deliver. Being trustworthy also means not allowing an inmate to believe everything they tell you can be kept confidential. You cannot keep anything private that might affect the security or safety of everyone in the institution.

You are "unpaid staff". Being trustworthy applies to your relationship with staff as well. Volunteers should be on time, end on time, and always follow all rules. Never, ever, let an inmate convince you to help them break even the smallest of rules. Not only will this give you credibility with staff, but also teach integrity and accountability to the

inmate.

**Be Confrontive | Deut 31:21** "For I know what they are inclined to do even at the present time, before I have brought them into the land which I promised on oath."

Confronting an inmate calmly with the difference in their statements and the reality of their actions is the sign of a good volunteer. Inmates will often minimize, deny, or blame their crimes on external forces. Good confrontation skills brings the inmate back to the truth of the situation and doesn't allow rationalizations and excuses. This hopefully will promote change.

Many inmates come from very difficult, often tragic backgrounds. It is easy to use this as a way of understanding how things came to this point. However, whatever past circumstances are, they did not cause the actions that led them to incarceration. The inmate chose to do the things he or she did. Making these points constructively helps the inmate accept responsibility.

**Be Objective - Don't Take Sides | 2 Tim 2:15** "Be eager to present yourself as acceptable to God..."

Never interfere or even verbally question a correctional officer in the midst of a situation inside the facility. Never talk about those issues with inmates. If you have a question or complaint, then take it to your immediate supervisor. Then things can be handled through the proper chain of command.

**Expect Hostility | Gal 5:14** "For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Sooner or later it is likely you will encounter a hostile inmate. Your response should be to listen and let the inmate vent his or her feelings. Make sure you have a way to leave, but do not act shocked or respond negatively. Retain your composure, respond calmly or withdraw from the situation.

**Don't Expect to be Thanked | Romans 12:10** "Love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor."

Oftentimes inmates don't show their gratitude well. You may never be told thank you. Sometimes certain members of custody staff may not understand why you do what you do and seem less than happy to help you. For some volunteers, this brings on a sense that they are unappreciated. Hang in there. You are making a difference, both in the stability of this inmate population and in individual lives.

## What YOU Have to Offer the Offenders

The person most important to your success and achievement at this correctional institution is the staff member with whom you work. In fact, technically, your only function as a VIC (Volunteer in Corrections) is to assist staff members in their duties.

People are complex multi-faceted beings; so are our needs when seeking out significance, value and worth. We are more than the object of a program or the tool of a new initiative. There must be more than conformity and robotic compliance to those who have more power. So it is with the incarcerated person. Offenders are accustomed to going along in order to get along. This perspective only works until the price for non-compliance is eclipsed by the delicious fruit of self-gratification. With this perspective, no price is too high, no level too low. Many times not even personal shame, loss of one's family, one's marriage or the return to prison can deter this self-destructive behavior.

There is an answer. Instead of changing the direction by sheer will, the entire focus must be replaced. This is where the faith component comes into play. Many offenders are eager to re-evaluate faith principals as they realize their self-seeking strategy has failed them miserably. Chapel programs challenge offenders to address the spiritual issues deep inside that they have ignored and denied. The faith community can assist in providing the element of spirituality during and even after incarceration.

## Working With the Staff

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### TIPS

No matter how good your intentions may be, or how much technical skill you may have in some other area, it is safe to assume that the staff member knows more about our inmates than you do. He is the expert. He has the wisdom gleaned from years of every kind of experience with offenders. He has the "sixth sense" necessary to maintain discipline and control that you may lack. He is usually sensitive when an inmate needs a little special attention or understanding.

If the staff member didn't seriously care about offenders, he could find plenty of other jobs that would probably pay more, have better working hours and conditions, and not involve commuting miles every day. Remember this when he seems overworked, hasty, or callous. You don't care more than he does. (And, if you last long enough, you develop your own callouses. They are necessary protection, and like callouses on your hands, free you to do a more effective job.)

The Correctional Officer or other staff member is responsible for the inmates and the institution. If you make an error in judgement and the inmates are unaccounted for, escape, act out, or destroy institutional property, he has to write the report. Your error is dismissed as "the mistake of a well-intentioned but untrained person". He is accountable for negligence, failure to supervise, inattention to duty, etc. so, in cases of disagreement, the staff member's judgement must prevail.

On occasion the Program Services Supervisor will call meetings to discuss current policy and procedures regarding citizen volunteers and give volunteers opportunities to have input in organizing and refining these guidelines. Any suggestions regarding the citizen Volunteer Program are both welcome and encouraged.

One of the easiest stances for the volunteer to fall into is that of being on the inmate's side "against" the institution.

"He doesn't understand you...but I do."

"He won't let you...but I will."

"He enforces a whole lot of meaningless rules...but you and I understand that they are not important."

Inmates are very alert to the possibilities of playing one individual against another, and do it with consummate skill. With the sort of destructive results that it brings about in any family or group. It is true that, as a volunteer, you are much freer to relate to inmates in certain ways, especially "permissive ways" than a staff member. You don't have to maintain a large group over a period of time, so you can stretch more rules and get away with it. It is exactly for this reason that it is so important you support the staff member, both verbally to him and always to the inmate. When you have a scheme, plan, or idea, always discuss it with the appropriate Department Head before you mention it to the inmate or group.

## What YOU Have to Offer the Staff

### Fresh Ideas

Most of us, no matter what our jobs, tend to become routinized in them. Some of this is necessary; however, we all get to the point where it is difficult to think up new ideas. We hesitate to experiment with new forms and possibly we need encouragement to see an old situation in a new light. Your very inexperience (with offenders) and enthusiasm, if it is tempered with the staff member's wisdom, can make for a team with a really "new thing".

### Freer Relationships

This one is dynamite and must be very carefully used. At times you can give an individual inmate a kind of attention and caring that the correctional Officer or other staff member cannot. (Not because he doesn't know how, doesn't see the need, or would like to, but because he is more bound to authoritarian form in his relationships because of the pressure of time, the number of inmates involved, and the need to maintain a relatively constant standard of discipline with the inmates.) Often, if you have a mutually non-threatening relationship with a staff member, he will be the one to point out an inmate with special needs, and you can really "assist" him in his work...laboris nisi ut aliquip.