

VISITING AND COMMUNICATING WITH ILLINOIS PRISONERS

It can be confusing to understand the Illinois Corrections' System. If you are trying to find, visit, or talk with someone who is in jail, there are rules and regulations that you should know. This article will give you an introduction to those rules and also give you links so that you can find more information.

Finding an inmate

Every incoming inmate first goes to a Reception and Classification (R&C) Center to be processed. Stateville, Graham, and Menard are the R&C centers in Illinois for male prisoners. All prisoners from counties in northern Illinois, including Cook County, are taken to the Northern Reception Center, which is part of Stateville Correctional Center. Logan is the R&C Center for all female prisoners. While in R&C, each inmate get their Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) identification number. Within a day or two of the time they arrive, the prisoner's number will be posted on the IDOC website. You will need this number whenever you visit them, or send them mail.

IDOC will place each inmate in the most suitable prison. There a lot of factors they use to pick a prison for the inmate. An inmate is not transported to the prison until there are available beds, which can take anywhere from one week to a year, in unusual cases. Be aware that inmates are not informed of their new location in advance, so they can't tell their family this information. No visitation is allowed for the first 30 days a prisoner is in an R&C. After that, they may be allowed limited visits, mail, and phone calls.

To find out an inmate's location after they are transferred out of the R&C you will need the inmate's last name, birthday, or IDOC number. You can then search for the inmate's location using the [IDOC Inmate Search](#).

If you would like to keep track of an inmate's movements, you can register with [Victim Information and Notification Everyday](#) (VINE). VINE was established to notify victims whenever a prisoner is moved, in transport, or about to be paroled. It is available to everyone. There is also a link on each prisoner's page on the IDOC website to sign up for VINE notifications.

Sending mail to an inmate

Inmates can receive mail at any time during their stay in prison. You may write to them as you would anyone else. When addressing the envelope, include the inmate number underneath or next to the inmate's name. It is very important that both the name and number of the prisoner be written exactly as it is written on the IDOC website. Do not use nicknames or your letter will be returned.

Mail that you send the inmate will be opened and searched for contraband. Contraband are items that are not allowed in the prison. Do not decorate your envelopes or letters. Envelopes or letters that are decorated with stickers, glitter, or tape will be sent back to you. Portions of an inmate's mail may be kept from the inmate if it could be a threat to security or safety. This includes:

- Threats of physical harm against any person or threats of criminal activity
- Threats of blackmail or extortion
- Information regarding sending contraband into or out of the facility, plans to escape, or plans to engage in criminal activity
- Letters in code that cannot be understood by prison staff
- Letters violating any department rules or containing plans to violate department rules
- Letters containing information which, if communicated, might result in physical harm to another
- Letters containing unauthorized messages with another offender
- Letters constituting a violation of State or Federal law

If mail is not given to the inmate, both you and the inmate will be notified in writing of that decision.

Sending money to an inmate

Money can be sent to the inmate and placed in their account for use in the commissary or for sending mail.

Money orders are no longer accepted at any Illinois prison. All money must be sent via Western Union or other currency exchanges using the Quick-Collect Form, or via [J-Pay](#).

Personal checks and cash sent to the prison will be returned to you, and you will be notified that money cannot be sent in that form.

Talking to an inmate on the phone

You can talk to an inmate as long as you are on an approved list.

When an inmate first reaches a prison, they will be allowed to submit a list of names of requested visitor and phone contacts. These lists can be revised once a month.

Inmates are only allowed to make collect calls. The telephone service the prisons use is [Securus](#) and you will have to establish an account with them to receive these calls.

Things to know before visiting a person in prison

Each prison has different visiting rules. It is best to call the prison before your first visit to ask what identification is required and what procedures they have. Usually two forms of government issued identification are required. A list of facilities can be found at [IDOC Facilities](#). Usually, you must be on the prisoner's proposed visitor list. This list can be changed only once a month.

When you visit a prison, both you and your car are subject to search. You are not allowed to bring in any items that are or could be considered contraband. You are also not allowed to bring cash into the prison. In order to buy food and drinks from the vending machine you must purchase a vending card, which usually costs \$1.00. You can add money to that card for use during your visit. Some prisons have lockers where you can store your belongings while you visit.

Prisons have instituted strict dress codes. Your clothing must cover your torso, including shoulders, from your neck to your knees. Women are required to wear bras but underwire bras are generally prohibited.

Visitors are permitted to wear religious headgear, but the headgear will have to be removed and subject to search. Unless the headgear is a kufi, yarmulke, turban, habit, or fez you will have to submit a written request to the Chief Administrative Officer of the prison at least 10 days prior to your visit. If the request is approved, then you will be able to wear your religious headgear, but it is still subject to search.

Be aware that the Chief Administrative Officer at the prison has complete say over all visits. They determine whether visits can happen, how long you can visit for, and how many people are allowed.

Age requirement for visitors

There are certain restrictions for minors who wish to visit an inmate. A person under 17 years old must be accompanied by an approved visitor who is older than 17 unless there is permission from the Chief Administrative Officer.

A minor who is 12-16 years old and who is not a member of the inmate's family, must have the consent of their legal guardian in order to visit.

Also, a minor under the age of 12 can only visit if:

- Brought by an approved visitor who is a parent or guardian
- There is prior written consent by a parent or guardian and it is stated in writing that the child is will be brought by an approved visitor, 17 years or older
- It is otherwise approved by the Chief Administrative Officer

Bringing items for a prisoner during a visit

You are not allowed to give or take anything from an inmate during your visit unless you have prior approval from the Chief Administrative Officer. If an inmate is found with an unapproved item during or after your visit, it is assumed that you gave them the item and you may be restricted from future visits.

The only thing you can bring for an inmate are approved publications such as books, magazines, newspapers, and similar items. You cannot bring more than 5 publications and they cannot be

packaged, wrapped, or otherwise contained in any way. Publications will be rejected if the entire publication or a portion of it has any of the following:

- Obscene material
- Is written in code or allows communication between offenders
- Has depictions, descriptions, or encouragement of activities that may lead to use of physical violence or group disruption
- Encourages or advocates violence, hatred, or group disruption or it poses a risk of violence or disruption
- Encourages or instructs people to commit a criminal activity
- Has sexually explicit material that by its nature or content poses a threat to security, good order, or discipline or it facilitates criminal activity
- Is otherwise detrimental to security, good order, rehabilitation, or discipline

Note: You can also order, subscribe, or solicit publications to be sent to an inmate. But they must meet the criteria of approved publications.

Visitation rules

Even though the rules can be different from prison to prison, you should be aware of common rules and the penalties for breaking those rules.

Any of the following actions could result in a visiting restriction for up to 6 months:

- Minor disruptive conduct
- Disobeying an order or posted rule
- Refusing to submit to a search
- Possession of drugs when there is no displayed intent to conceal or bring drugs into the prison
- Possession of alcohol when there is no displayed intent to conceal or bring alcohol into the prison
- Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Possession of contraband as defined under State, federal, or local laws or other departmental rules

And the following actions could result in a permanent visiting restriction:

- Assaultive behavior of any kind against anyone
- Sexual misconduct
- Possession of weapons
- Possession of drugs or drug paraphernalia
- Unauthorized possession of money
- Possession of escape paraphernalia
- Possession of alcohol
- Providing false identification information
- Major disruptive conduct

- Violation of any State, federal, or local law during a visit
- Repeating an action that previously resulted in a temporary restriction

You should also know that if any contraband is discovered in the possession of an inmate during or after a visit, it will be assumed that you gave it to them during the visit.

More information on visiting inmates

The following sites have more information on visiting prisons and communicating with inmates:

- [Illinois Department of Corrections](#)
- [Illinois Prison Talk](#) is a message board for visitors to Illinois' Prisons
- [Illinois Code](#) lists the laws about visitation and communication with inmates