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Resources @ EJP

Illinois In-Person Prison Visitation Guide for Families

This resource is provided by Education Justice Project to assist families, friends, and loved ones with visitations to individuals in custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). We based this guide on a letter given to us by the mother of one of our students that included useful tips for conducting a prison visitation in person. We did additional research and are happy to offer this resource to others.

Visitations should be fulfilling experiences for the person inside and equally enriching for the visitor. Often though, cancellations, lockdowns, or misunderstandings about visit regulations can lead to disappointment. People can travel for hours with the expectation of seeing their loved one, only to be turned away and sent back home. Here is some advice to help prepare yourself for a prison visit.

Before Your Visit

First, your person inside has to add you to their visitor's list. They will need to provide your full name, address, phone number, race, gender, and age. It could take days or weeks for you to be approved. Those inside can have six visits per month. Two of those visits can be on weekends and holidays. Times when you can schedule visits vary from prison to prison. Visitation lengths can also be different for each facility.

Children must be listed on the approved visitation list. Anyone under 18 must be accompanied by an adult. Additionally, a [DOC330](#) form must be completed for each child under the age of 18 by their legal guardian. Please note that this form must be notarized, which can be done by a notary at, for example, a public library or your bank. How many children can visit may depend on the seating arrangement in the visitation room. Infant children may sit on someone's lap. There are no age restrictions. If you have any questions, you can reach out to the visitation coordinator at the prison.

You should know your loved one's IDOC number before you visit. If you do not know it already, you can look up their IDOC number [online](#).

After you have confirmed with your loved one that your name has been added to their visitor's list, you can go to the [Sign-Up Genius](#) form to schedule a visitation. Helpful hint: do not leave any of the spaces blank, instead mark "NA." You will receive an email confirming your visit time and date. If you do not get an email confirmation, you should assume it is not scheduled and try again. The system can have glitches, so be patient.

There are a few barriers to be aware of. If a visitor has a criminal case pending, or if they have been convicted of a felony, they cannot visit an Illinois prison. If a person is out on bond, mandatory supervised release, parole or probation, or if they are a formerly incarcerated person, they should take an extra step to get permission. It is advisable to send a hard copy of a letter to the warden of the facility. Include in the letter any past legal issues and how they have been resolved. It is also a good idea to track the mail so that you are notified of the facility's receipt of your correspondence and can follow up accordingly. You can find mailing addresses and the name of the warden at each facility [here](#).

Your First Visit

On your first visit to a prison, you will have to fill out a Prospective Visitor's Interview form. To make it easier, you can print out the [Prospective Visitor's Interview](#) form beforehand and complete it. The form is also available in [Spanish](#). Alternatively, you can wait until you arrive at the prison and fill out the form at that time.

You may be nervous and tense when visiting prison. You may be uncomfortable around the guards. Try to remain calm. Allow yourself 15 minutes to get there early. On very rare occasions, your car can be searched in the parking lot, so make certain there is nothing that would be considered contraband.

At the front desk, you will need to provide guards with your loved one's name and IDOC number. You will also have to write down your license plate number. For your first visit to the prison, you will need two forms of ID. You can use your driver's license, but make sure it has not expired. The address on your driver's license must match the address your loved one provided on their approved visit list. You can use a passport if you have one. Other IDs that can work: school ID, FOID card, military ID. Later visits, you should only need one form of identification.

It is important you have all of this information, proper identification, and dress appropriately (see below) so that you do not get turned away. Having to drive back home without seeing your loved one is frustrating.

Once you have signed in at the front desk, you will be instructed to put any personal items (car key, wallet, etc.) into a locker. It's best to leave your cell phone, purse, smart watch, and anything unnecessary in your car. The only things you can take inside with you are a driver's license, vending card, and locker key. There is a restroom in the visiting area, but you may want to use the restroom in the front lobby. If you need to use the restroom during your visit, you will be searched again before reentering.

Lockdowns

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns were enforced to stop spread of the illness and since then lockdowns have become increasingly common. Lockdowns may also be a result of fights, Internal Affairs investigations, and other various reasons. Make sure to call the prison the day of your visitation before setting off on your travels to ensure there is no lockdown in place. You can find a list of all Illinois prisons with contact information [here](#).

You can also check [online](#) for lockdowns, or call the IDOC Lockdown Hotline at (877) 840-3220. It's a good practice to ask at the prison about visiting a specific individual. Sometimes lockdowns only affect a certain house or area. Sometimes segregation status may also affect visits, but will not be noted on the hotline. If an individual is in solitary, they may not be allowed visitors. Some may be allowed visits, but they can be limited to one hour and are no-contact visits behind plexiglass.

What to Wear

One of the most common reasons people are denied a visit is because they are wearing clothing that violates prison rules. Visitors should not wear clothing that is “sexually explicit.” Women are not allowed in if they are wearing tops that are see through or show cleavage. Nothing tight fitting. No leggings. Avoid wearing shorts or skirts unless they fall below your knees. Visitors must wear a bra and underwear. No pants with holes in them. Nothing that would be interpreted as a gang sign. You must wear closed toe shoes, no sandals or flip flops. Your best bet is to wear a plain T-shirt, sweatshirt, or collared shirt, with nice jeans or pants, and sneakers. If you are turned away for clothing, you can try going to a Wal-Mart or another store nearby to buy new clothes and return to the prison for your visitation.

Vending Machines

If you would like to purchase food in the vending machine, you will need to purchase a vending card in the front lobby. Your loved ones inside will often appreciate the options in the vending machines and it's a kind gesture to buy them something to eat and drink. Be warned, the vending machines are overpriced. You might want to eat beforehand to avoid the high prices. It will cost \$2-\$3 to purchase the card. The machines only take cash. About \$20 on a vending card will get you some snacks. Never put more than \$40 on a card, because you may lose it. You must use a vending card. The vending machines inside do not take cash.

The Visiting Room

After checking in at the front desk, putting your personal items in a locker, and purchasing a vending card, a correctional officer will escort you through a metal detector. By this point you should have nothing but your driver's license, vending card, and locker key. You will then be taken into a small room and searched. You will have to take off your shoes. When the search is done, you'll be taken through several corridors and locked doors that staff will open from inside a control room. Eventually, you will make it to the visiting room.

Your loved one may or may not be there waiting for you. If so, you can join them at the table. If not, you may check in at the desk with the officer in the room who will assign you a table to sit at. If you have to wait more than 20 minutes for your loved one, feel free to speak to an officer. When you first see them, you will be able to hug your loved one. The visit is face to face. There is a restroom you can use, but you will need to ask a staff person who will escort you and stand outside the restroom door. If you finish your visit sooner than the allowed time, you can always leave earlier if you want.

Enjoy the conversation with your loved one. If you want to purchase food from the vending machines, ask your loved one what they would like to eat or drink. There are bags of potato chips and candy bars. There are also sandwiches that can be warmed up in a microwave. Your loved one must stay at the table while you go make purchases. If you would like to play a card game, there are often cards you can buy in the machines, or sometimes there is an extra set of cards in the visiting room. Many visiting rooms also have a few board games available for use as well. You can hug your loved one again before you leave. You will be taken by a correctional officer back to the locker to retrieve your belongings.

To read the IDOC's rules and information about visitations you can go online to see the [short](#) and [long](#) versions. If you need any further assistance, you can contact the Visitation Coordinator at the facility. You can find the IDOC facility directory [here](#).

We hope you have a good visit with your loved one. Drive safely on the way home.

With love and solidarity.

EJP