

Grantee Spotlight: The Pennsylvania Prison Society

For more than 235 years, [the Prison Society](#) has worked to promote the health, safety, and dignity of people behind bars. On May 8, 1787, just weeks before the start of the Constitutional Convention, our nation's founders established the Pennsylvania Prison Society out of the conviction that "The obligations of benevolence are not canceled by the follies or crimes of our fellow creatures."

That moment and their words still inspires the Pennsylvania Prison Society.

Their mission to advance the health, safety, and dignity of the people who live and work in prisons and jails across the Commonwealth is as relevant today as it was two centuries ago. Hidden from public view, abuse and degradation behind bars often goes unnoticed. Closed off from communities and families, prisons isolate people from the supports they need so that they can thrive when they come home.

Over the past three years, conditions in the Philadelphia jails have deteriorated into a full-blown crisis. Since the start of the pandemic, there have been at least 40 deaths (including at least eight by suicide and five by homicide) in the Philadelphia jails—an annual jail mortality rate 77% higher than the national average. The increase in deaths, major disturbances, and assaults is the consequence of highly restrictive lockdowns throughout the pandemic, a severe staff shortage that persists and has left housing units unsupervised for hours at a time, and a rising jail population that has rebounded above pre-pandemic levels. Through direct access to city leadership and partnerships across the region, the Prison Society has called for immediate action to end the violence, neglect, and extreme isolation in the city's jails. ***Since receiving the Impact100 award, the Prison Society has played a key advisory role in establishing a new jail oversight board with expanded access in Philadelphia.***

Connection is a critical component to promoting health, safety, and dignity. People in prison are just that: People. They are brothers, uncles, mothers, and neighbors. Maintaining connection with loved ones on the outside strengthens the relationships people need to help them cope with incarceration and thrive when they come home.

This year, the Prison Society bolstered efforts to dismantle systemic isolation by increasing staff and programming. Their Helpline more than doubled its capacity to answer questions about prisons and jails; they launched a new monthly support group for formerly incarcerated people; and refined their ability to help families negotiate technological barriers associated with visiting policies. The Prison Society is helping more families navigate an opaque, traumatizing system. A distraught mother called their office frustrated that the jail would not help her visit. The Helpline staff took the time to walk her through the process, reuniting her with her son for the first time since his arrest. For many families, new digital systems are confusing or inaccessible without help from our staff. No family should be barred from visiting because of a disability, poverty, or lack of digital savvy.

The Prison Society also launched programming in a Community Correctional Center (CCC or halfway house) for the first time in recent organizational history. Prison Society Family Reunification groups offer a space for people transitioning home to reflect and begin repairing interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, Prison Society mentors continue to provide crucial, individualized support for mentees as they prepare for life after incarceration. A mentoring program participant who was beginning the fall term at a community college was denied parole, causing his release to be

delayed another six months. His mentor jumped into action, contacted the community college and arranged for a deferment, ensuring that his admission efforts didn't go to waste.

The Prison Society returned to in-person events last September with its Love Above Bars event at World Café Live. They were thrilled to welcome over 200 guests for a program that featured their incarcerated person of the year, correctional officer of the year, volunteer of the year, and honored 2023 Human Rights Champion Speaker Joanna McClinton. The Prison Society will return to World Café Live for Love Above Bars on Wednesday, September 25, 2024.

They have just completed their first-ever brand video, which will debut at a watch party and through targeted marketing on April 4, 2024.

To get more detailed information on the latest news in Pennsylvania prisons and jails, sign up for the weekly Supporter Update emails.

<https://www.prisonsociety.org/subscribe>

Volunteers are the backbone of the Prison Society, and they are always looking for committed individuals who care deeply about human dignity. If you are interested in getting more involved with the Prison Society's work both inside and outside of prisons, please visit their website to learn more.

<https://www.prisonsociety.org/services/volunteer>