



TEXASTM

EVANGELIST

DO's AND DON'Ts FOR PRISON MINISTRY VOLUNTEERS

(Input provided by Prison Fellowship Ministries)

1. **DON'T take anything in or out of prison without approval.** The chaplain or Jail Ministries leader should approve everything you take into prison. This means even a Bible, tracts or a letter. **NO CHEWING GUM.** Many things that are okay on the outside are NOT okay inside prison. Chewing gum, which is harmless on the street, might clog locks inside a prison.
2. **DON'T bring a camera.** Photographs are not allowed on prison grounds except by written permission from the warden under special circumstances.
3. **DON'T bring a cell phone inside.** Cell phones are not allowed, under any circumstances, on prison grounds at any time and should be left at home or in your vehicle before entering the facility.
4. **DON'T take anything from a prisoner.** This means anything. Not even a letter, photo, or poem. You might say, "I can't until I check with the chaplain." Sometimes prisoners will test you to see if you will break rules. This may be a way for them to see if you are "for real."
5. **DON'T hug prisoners.** Do not give the officers any reason to think you may be doing anything against the rules, like accepting or delivering contraband (items not allowed in prison.) Even if hugging is permitted in the prison, do not do it. A warm handshake usually is appreciated and appropriate.
6. **DON'T make promises that you can't keep.** Don't say you'll come back or help a person unless you know for sure that you will. **DON'T** say you'll do things for prisoners until you know the rules and check with the Jail Ministries leader or the chaplain.

Most prisoners have had many great disappointments and hurts in life. Don't be another one for them. They can accept an honest "no" much better than a "yes" or "maybe" that never happens.
7. **DON'T give out your address or telephone number.** If asked, you might say, "I'm sorry, but we were told it was against the rules to do that." You might explain kindly that you must obey the rules, as they must. You might say that you don't want to do anything that could prevent Jail Ministries programs from helping prisoners.
8. **DON'T ask why a person is or has been in prison.** Would you want someone to ask you about your sins?
9. **DON'T be "preachy" or push people into making a decision for Christ.** People usually want you to like them and often will say that they have trusted Christ simply to please you. Many "trust Christ" over and over through well-meaning volunteers. Be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. What is most important is that prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families need a demonstration of love—someone who cares. This often opens them up to receive the Lord whose love we show. Remember, planting and watering are just as important as reaping a harvest.
10. **DON'T criticize staff, the institution, other races, countries, or religions.** Try to steer conversations into something positive and helpful. Also, we want to welcome people of all religions into our worship services, so don't condemn other religions. Instead, speak the truth, as you know it, in love, and be kind and courteous. Lastly, do not use the term "Guard" but rather use Correctional Officer in referring to those who may be escorting you.

12. **DON'T enter into any business interactions with prisoners.** For example, a prisoner may ask you to sell his or her artwork on the outside.
13. **DON'T run on prison grounds (that includes the outside of the prison).** Sometimes volunteers will run to their cars because it's cold or wet outside, or they are in a hurry, or just from excitement. Running could startle a prison officer in a prison tower.
14. **DO bring a valid, current photo ID.** Volunteers have been turned away from a prison because their ID was a driver's license that was invalid or had an address that was not current.
15. **DO dress properly.** Check to see if there are local dress codes or suggestions. Some prisons do not allow volunteers to wear jeans. Don't wear anything sexually suggestive. Don't wear low-cut or revealing clothing. Dress simply and modestly, without much jewelry or aftershave or perfume. Sweat pants, cut-offs, shorts and flip-flop sandals are NOT acceptable.
16. **DO stay together as a group.** Wait for instructions from the chaplain or prison officer, even to go to the restrooms. Move through the prison together, without much space between people. Leave when you've been told it is time to leave. Cooperate fully with the prison officers.
17. **DO be very kind and courteous to everyone.** Smiles are fine, if they are genuine. You are a good-will ambassador for prison-ministry. Whenever possible, thank prison officers for their help and for allowing you to come into the prison. Thank prisoners for their help, when appropriate.
18. **DO check the rules if you are an ex-prisoner going into a prison.** Some prisons have rules about ex-prisoners coming into a prison. If you are on probation or parole, it might be against the rules for you to associate with prisoners.
19. **DO be aware of con games.** Be vigilant at all times. When you find that prisoners are friendly and kind, and fun to be with, you will probably forget that they are prisoners. That's great. But don't forget: Some of them have spent their lives either conning (deceiving) people or being conned (having others deceive them.) Therefore, don't automatically believe everything that a prisoner tells you. Some may work on your sympathy or guilt feelings to get what they want. You usually won't help a person change for the better by becoming another victim. As long as a person can use you, you will have trouble gaining his or her respect. As Christ said, "Be wise like snakes and gentle like doves." (Matt 10:16 NLV) They may tell you some very convincing stories, especially when trying to get money from you. Check out their story with the chaplain, the TEXAS PRISON MINISTRY Leader or an experienced volunteer. Again, don't make any promises or get involved with a prisoner without counsel and help.
20. **DO be trustworthy when someone shares with you personal or confidential information.** Be careful about repeating what someone has told you. Do not publicly ask for prayer about someone's private or personal matter, unless you have their permission to do so. Don't ask individuals to pray privately about someone's personal issues that might embarrass or cause people to feel that their trust has been violated.
21. **DO be honest about your limited confidentiality.** Don't promise to keep a prisoner's "secret" before you have heard it. You may not be able to keep it. For instance, if you are told something that could endanger a person's life or an institution, it is imperative that you talk to appropriate parties about it, like the TEXAS EVANGELIST MNISTRY Leader or the chaplain of the institution. Discourage inmates from confessing illegal activities. If a person confesses a crime to you, you may be called to testify against that person in a criminal trial.
22. **DO be prepared to handle flirting or romantic advances.** If you handle this issue firmly, but kindly, you will probably prevent a problem. You might simply say, "That's not why I am here," and then change the subject. Suppose a man says to a woman volunteer, "My, you have pretty legs." She might say, "Thank you. They work well. That's the important thing about legs, isn't it? Now would you tell me something about the programs offered to you here?" It is important that people learn to relate to the opposite sex in nonsexual ways. Female volunteers can be a great help in teaching this. One female volunteer was asked by a man in prison, "What do you think

about sex?” She answered, “I think it’s great if you play according to God’s rules. Now let’s talk about the topic we are supposed to discuss.”

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You might also think of other questions to ask, such as, “How did you learn about TEXAS EVANGELIST MINISTRY ?” Or, “Tell me what a day in prison is like.” Or, “would you tell me what plans you have for your life?”

23. **DO be a good listener. Prisoners need someone who will listen to them.** They need someone who sees what they think and feel. By listening, you can hear what needs they may have and what questions they may have, and as the Holy Spirit leads, you can be part of the renewing process God is working in their lives. Remember, many prisoners have never had someone care enough about them to really listen to them. Be that someone. Usually, it is best not to show shock at anything that is said. You don’t have to agree with what is being said, but you can be accepting of the person.
24. **Do try to find ways to encourage and give hope.** Try to help the prisoner see his/her significance in the Person of Jesus Christ, since it is usually extremely low among prisoners.
25. **DO be natural and be yourself.** Don’t try to talk differently or use prisoners’ slang. Don’t worry about cultural differences or trying to relate to prison culture. If you’re just yourself, you’ll find acceptance. Don’t pretend to understand if you don’t. You don’t have to understand to be understanding. If you are asked a question you don’t know, give that great answer, “I don’t know.” Prisoners are perceptive people who can usually spot a phony right away. They know if you’re “for real” and if you’re genuinely caring. Remember, love crosses all barriers – racial, social class, gender, educational, and age. Love is language anyone can understand. The real you is a great gift you can offer prisoners. As they receive that gift, they will benefit from it.

This is a very long list of “dos and don’ts” but it is crucial that we aim to meet this list as we are ambassadors of Jesus Christ and representatives of TEXAS EVANGELIST MINISTRY. It is the *spirit* of how we follow this list, by having the same, humble mind as Christ (Phil. 2), that is so important and brings glory to God. This is not a tool to cause frustration and it is not meant to discourage visitors. We must realize when we visit a correctional facility we must work within their system and at Jail Ministries we aim to follow an even higher road than the expectations that are set forth by the facility being visited.

We thank you for your cooperation and for serving Jesus side by side with us.

