



## ***One Heart Notes – Guidelines for Writing Incarcerated Youth Offenders***

In an effort to support and communicate value to incarcerated youth, the One Heart Project (OHP) recognizes the need for this population to continue building a one-on-one, life on life relationship beyond mentoring weekly.

As a response, OHP's ***One Heart Notes Program*** provides mentors and those from the One Heart community with a way to stay connected, and even extend their connection, with participating youth through meaningful contact and encouragement, while giving them an opportunity to communicate back to our One Heart team and mentors. Youth are also encouraged to send notes.

It's a win for both the youth offender who needs connection, communication, and encouragement, and for the you. Sending a written message provides a significant blessing knowing that a void is being filled in the life of an incarcerated youth through a simple expression of "***I cared enough to write.***"

Guidelines for letter writing are necessary and generally agreed upon by most prisons including juvenile justice facilities. The following guidelines serve as suggested tips, principles and best practices for both the sender and the youth.

- 1) It is strongly advised that women should write to women and men should write to men**
- 2) Share your motive**
  - What is your primary reason for writing? What are the other reasons?
- 3) Keep your written notes positive, encouraging, and hopeful**
  - This does not mean that you cannot discuss things of a general nature, or of mutual interest, however, your primary role in writing is that of encouragement in the form of a mentorship.
- 4) Be genuine in your communication**
- 5) Do not communicate regarding any portions of their case or legal issues**
- 6) Do not discuss their crime**
- 7) Do not inquire as to why they are incarcerated**
- 8) Do not engage in negative discussions concerning the prison administration, its officials, correctional staff, or any other employee**
- 9) Do not address vindictive, negative, vengeful, or angry discourses of any kind.**
  - Turn such expressions toward positive encouragement.
- 10) Never discuss another inmate or divulge the names of other inmates to others on the outside.**
  - For security reasons, the facility typically prohibits this.
- 11) Do not discuss details of anything pertaining to security issues within the prison.**
  - Including movement times, disciplinary procedures, transportation practices, etc.
- 12) Never contact other individuals on behalf of the inmate**
- 13) Do not include an additional note or message for an inmate *other* than the person to whom your letter is addressed.**
  - This also means not enclosing a note from someone else other than yourself.
- 14) For a return address, use the One Heart Project address: P.O. Box 92790, Southlake, TX 76092**

- This is not because the one you are writing to can't be trusted. Rather, it's because addresses have a way of getting into the hands of others. Privacy is not a part of the culture in a facility, so avoid divulging personal information that you would want other inmates knowing.
- 15) Do not make promises that you are not prepared to keep**
  - Youth will often cling to the slightest promise made, even if it has only been implied or inferred. Be clear about what you can or cannot do, including your future intentions
- 16) Remember that most inmates will be released, anywhere within 3 months to 3 years**
  - Unless you are personally planning to work with your mentee upon post release, make sure that the limits of the assistance you are willing to give is clearly understood. Kindness and pen pal support can be assumed to mean that you will be there for them at release. Make it clear what you can or cannot do. The earlier the better.
- 17) Do not respond to inmates' inquiries that ask about your deep personal feelings.**
  - Be wary of the tone of the letter becoming too forward or familiar.
- 18) Do not respond to inquiries that probe too deeply into your personal affairs. (Home, business, etc.)**
- 19) Never send someone else's address**
  - For example, responding to the request, "Do you know anyone else out there who might be willing to write me?"
- 20) Never inform someone else that the prisoner to whom you are writing will soon be moved to another specific location**
  - Not even family members. This is a serious breach of security. There is usually no good reason why the juvenile offender can't inform such people himself.
- 21) Stay in touch with your own emotions**
  - Be careful not to share your own emotional needs with the offender.
- 22) Set parameters early**
  - Let your juvenile offender know why you are writing and stick to it. If the youth offender cannot abide by your limits, then it would be best to quit writing.
- 23) Terminate unhealthy communications**
  - If the communication becomes unhealthy, let the youth know that you will no longer be corresponding and kindly explain why.
- 24) Seek advice**
  - If you are in doubt as to how to proceed, seek the advice of the One Heart Project.

Exchanging letters with youth offenders *can* be an edifying experience for you and is, without doubt, encouraging and vital to help restore hope and confidence for the youth. It is OHP's belief that many youth offenders can be greatly encouraged and built up through an exchange of letters. Each youth will frequently bless *you* as much—if not more—than you expected to bless *them*. Their letters are often deeply touching and share deep reflection.

May this program bless you and the process with an incarcerated youth as you seek to alleviate their pain by remembering them in this merciful way.

With One Heart,

The One Heart Project