

VOLUNTEERING IN PRISONS

This section provides guidance to help you become a confident and effective volunteer in prisons. It incorporates insights from *Helping Hands* by Daniel J. Bayse, TDCJ regulations, and *Small Group Best Practices* by Amy Jackson.

Understanding Prison Context

Prison or jail sentences are typically categorized as felonies or misdemeanors. Felonies include murder, assault, robbery, rape, and drug trafficking. Those convicted of felonies may face fines, prison sentences, life imprisonment, or even the death penalty in state or federal penitentiaries.

- **Felony Focus:** Malachi Dads mentors men convicted of felonies.
- **Avoid Judgment:** Volunteers should not ask about the inmate's past crimes. Focus instead on mentoring for positive change and helping them prepare for a better future as a Godly men.

Prison Behaviors and Challenges

Inmates in our program have been in prison for several years to many decades and have learned prison behaviors.

- **Ingrained Behaviors:** Many inmates have developed survival behaviors during their time in prison. These can be negative and hard to change.
- **Struggles with Change:** Some inmates may appear ready to change but later disengage, often blaming external factors. Volunteers should encourage personal responsibility and perseverance.
- **Overcoming Self-Doubt:** Many inmates doubt their ability to change. Volunteers provide consistent encouragement, fostering hope and showing that transformation is possible.
- **Reframing "Can't":** Help inmates understand that "can't" often means "won't." Guide them in recognizing their ability for growth and self-improvement.

Encouraging Obedience in Daily Life

Volunteers play a vital role in helping inmates align their daily actions with God's teachings. That obedience to God requires more than faith; it demands commitment to living out His principles daily and consistently.

For example, an inmate might write to his wife, "We must follow God's teachings and be a happy couple." However, he may not recognize his own need to treat his wife with respect, instead expecting God to make her treat him better despite his self-centered behavior. Inmates must understand that faith alone is insufficient; commitment to learning and following God's commands in their daily life is essential for meaningful change.

Three Stages to Volunteer Effectiveness

Becoming an effective prison volunteer is a process. Volunteers typically go through three phases:

Initial Stage: Overly sympathetic toward inmates.

Middle Stage: Frustrated with the prison system and overly focused on inmate issues, making them unaware of their own blind spots.

Final Stage: Achieve balance by understanding strengths and weaknesses of inmates, programs, and the institution. At this stage, volunteers discover how inmates, staff, and volunteers can work together effectively. This is when volunteers become most effective.

Key Qualities of an Effective Volunteer

Men from diverse backgrounds, regardless of age, education, or profession, can serve as impactful prison volunteers. The following attributes are important for success:

Faith and Obedience: Malachi Dad volunteers must be believers who love God, pray, and are willing to share God's love with others.

Ethical Conduct: Treat all individuals with respect and integrity, irrespective of their behavior toward you. Do not be judgmental.

Active Listening: Pay close attention to inmates, valuing their thoughts and boosting their self-esteem. Many inmates may have never experienced genuine listening, and trust develops over time. Repeated statements often highlight what matters most to them.

Empathy with Discernment: Seek to understand inmates' perspectives without naivety or gullibility. Empathy fosters connection but should not override objectivity.

Respectfulness: Approach each inmate as an individual, free from prejudice. Allow relationships to develop naturally, letting inmates decide when to share personal details.

Authenticity: Be genuine, expressing your thoughts with care and tact. Authenticity includes accepting constructive criticism without defensiveness.

Patience: Prepare for logistical challenges such as delayed gate entries, lockdowns, or missed chapel sessions. Never express frustration about the system in the presence of inmates.

Dependability: Prove trustworthiness by adhering to rules, being punctual, and avoiding actions that enable rule-breaking.

Constructive Confrontation: Gently highlight inconsistencies between an inmate's statements and behaviors. Approaching these moments calmly—or even with humor—can promote accountability.

Objectivity: Refrain from taking sides in disputes, whether between inmates and staff or among inmates.