

BZC County Jail Pen Pal Program

BACKGROUND: The Alameda county jail, also known as Santa Rita jail, is the fifth largest jail in the country, confining over 2,000 people each day. Santa Rita is located in Dublin, a suburb of the East Bay. Most of the people incarcerated in the county jail are awaiting trial; they have not been convicted of a crime. The average length of stay within Santa Rita is 30 days. The jail also confines people who are serving sentences typically no longer than a year. The incarcerated population is around 90 percent male and 10 percent female. About half of those locked up are black, even though black people only make up 10 percent of the population of Alameda County. Many if not most of the people confined in Santa Rita are homeless, mentally ill, and/or drug-addicted. The jail's budget for 2021 is \$250 million, almost 10 percent of the county budget.

People incarcerated in the Alameda County jail are routinely subject to abuse, neglect, and extreme isolation. They spend most of each day in their cells, deprived of opportunities to move around, go outside, or participate in programming, which induces depression, anxiety, and conflict. They are served food that is flavorless, unhealthy, and occasionally spoiled, and if they want to buy their own food in the canteen, it's often overpriced. They live in housing units that are filthy and foul-smelling because Santa Rita fails to provide adequate cleaning supplies—for example, incarcerated people must purchase their own soap. They are cold, especially during the winter, and the jail refuses to give them enough clothing. They struggle to sleep at night since the mattresses are thin and the lights are often left on. They often feel condescended, if not dehumanized and humiliated, by guards. They are isolated from their loved ones because their access to visitation and the telephone is severely limited. And they are rarely able to remedy these problems through Santa Rita's grievance system, which is opaque and corrupt.

GOALS: The BZC County Jail Pen Pal Program will connect BZC participants with people in Santa Rita who are looking for friendship. The program will also provide a network of support, a listening ear, and a sounding board for BZC participants. The main purpose of the correspondence will be to build bonds with our incarcerated community members, offer emotional/spiritual support, and learn about life inside the county jail. While pen pal relationships with incarcerated people can be beautiful and illuminating, they can also be upsetting and confusing, as jails and prisons are concentrated sites of oppression, deprivation, and trauma, so BZC participants will regularly meet as a group to process their experiences and seek guidance from one another. Though not a requirement for participation, BZC members will also have the opportunity to join an ecosystem of individuals and organizations advocating on behalf of loved ones incarcerated in Santa Rita. The project will have its own P.O. Box to receive letters.

GUIDELINES:

- Respond within two weeks of receiving a letter; if you are unable to respond within two weeks or decide to stop writing your pen pal, let them and the BZC group know
- Treat your pen pal as equal, not an object of pity; be mindful of the power dynamics inherent to the relationship; examine your assumptions about your pen pal
- Respect boundaries and privacy in the same way you would in any relationship; communicate your own boundaries in a clear, affirmative, nonjudgemental manner
- Be honest and direct if you receive requests that you are unable to meet; do not make promises that you cannot keep
- Do not share information about your pen pal without their consent, especially on social media; feel free to process difficult information with trusted friends, but keep in mind that you could put your pen pal at risk by sharing their information publicly

- Since your mail may be read by jail officials, be thoughtful about sharing information that could put you at risk, such as immigration status or history of incarceration
- Lean into BZC participants for emotional support and advice on how to respond to particular situations; commit to attending regular meetings

RESOURCES:

- [Testimonies from people incarcerated in Santa Rita](#)
- [Collective grievance from February 2020 written by people incarcerated in Santa Rita](#)
- [Weekly updates on conditions, lawsuits, statistics, and community organizing in Santa Rita](#)
- [Oaklandside article from April 2021 about unconstitutionality of Santa Rita mental health care system](#)
- [Berkeleyside article from May 2020 about COVID in Santa Rita](#)
- [East Bay Express article from May 2019 about deaths in Santa Rita](#)
- [The Appeal article from November 2019 about involuntary servitude in Santa Rita](#)
- [Santa Rita Weekend by The Coup \(song\)](#)