



## **Practical Information for County Commissioners and Wardens on “Reopening” for In-Person Family Visits**

**May, 2021**

Twenty-nine states -- including Pennsylvania as of May 22nd -- have taken the important step of resuming in-person family visits to improve the mental health of people living in custody and allow them to strengthen their ties to the broader community. This memorandum is to aid counties in planning for careful resumption of in-person visits.

**The Prison Society recommends county correctional facilities resume non-contact visits in a manner consistent with CDC guidelines to prevent transmission of the coronavirus.** This includes performing verbal COVID-19 screening and temperature checks on visitors entering the facility and requiring visitors to wear masks. The Prison Society further recommends using outdoor space for visiting when possible, and maintaining physical distance with visitors.

The first section of this memo synthesizes current public health recommendations and summarizes the cautious approaches to reopening that counties in Pennsylvania and states around the country are taking. The second section provides an overview of why in-person visits are critically important for people in jail custody.

### **I. RECOMMENDATIONS AND COVID-19 PREVENTION PRACTICES: LIMITED RESUMPTION OF IN-PERSON, NON-CONTACT OR OUTDOOR VISITS**

In its guidance to correctional facilities updated May 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) notes that “Visitation is important to maintain mental health.” The CDC encourages use of non-contact visits, requiring visitors to wear masks, and performing verbal screening and temperature checks on visitors entering the facility.<sup>1</sup> Based on our discussions with public health experts, the Prison Society also

recommends using outdoor space for visiting, maintaining physical distance with visitors, and limiting the frequency of visits.<sup>2</sup>

Correctional facilities in [29 states](#) plus the federal prison system have safely resumed in person visits, as have [19 county prisons](#) in Pennsylvania. Below are examples of COVID-19 prevention strategies implemented to mitigate the risks associated with in-person visits in prisons inside and outside of Pennsylvania.

**Centre County** has resumed non-contact visits but made these visits contingent on community outbreak levels.

**Union and Warren Counties** have resumed non-contact visits for people in custody who have quarantined for two weeks and tested negative.

**Pennsylvania** will begin opening state prisons to visitors in phases beginning May 22, based on each facility's rate of vaccination, number of active infections, and results from tests that detect levels of the coronavirus in wastewater. Visitors will be screened for COVID-19, required to wear disposable masks provided by the prison and will have to physically distance from the incarcerated person they are visiting. Each person in custody is limited to three visits per month.

**Delaware** resumed family visits on March 16, 2021. Visits are restricted to one adult visitor per incarcerated person per visit. All visitors must wear a DOC-issued face mask, and visitors are screened when entering the facility.

**New Jersey** began a limited number of outdoor visits at all its of state facilities starting on May 1, 2021. Visits are by appointment only and are limited to two adult visitors and two children/youth. All visitors complete a health screening.

**New York State** resumed family visits on April 28, 2021, with restrictions. Visiting rooms operate at half capacity, and outdoor spaces are utilized whenever possible. No physical contact is allowed, and the number of visitors is limited to three adults and one child per visit.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/correction-detention/guidance-correctional-detention.html#correctional-facilities> Updated May 6, 2021

<sup>2</sup> For this memorandum the Prison Society consulted with Joe Amon, Clinical Professor of Community Health at Drexel University and Carolyn Cannuscio, Associate Professor of Family Medicine and Community Health at the University of Pennsylvania.



**In Michigan**, all visitors must agree to an antigen test. Visits must be scheduled 72 hours in advance, and visits are limited to 2 hours.

**In Texas**, visitors must take a rapid coronavirus test before being admitted. All visits are scheduled in advance and are limited to two people over the age of 13.

An additional approach to resuming family visits safely would be to prioritize the first in-person for fully vaccinated people in custody. This approach has favor with some public health experts who see it as a way to incentivise vaccination. Others may see this as coercive and an insensitive way of addressing vaccine apprehension. Our overview of current practices did not find any facilities adopting this approach.

## II. WHY IN PERSON VISITING MATTERS: MENTAL HEALTH & RE-ENTRY

The intense isolation incarcerated people have endured over the past year is taking a toll on their mental health. Many people in prison custody have spent the majority of the pandemic confined to a small cell for 23 or 22 hours a day. Their first-hand [reports](#) of this experience speak to the detrimental impact on mental health.

Closing prisons to family visits during the pandemic eliminated a source of social support that research has demonstrated can help incarcerated people cope with mental distress, including the risk of suicide and self-harm.<sup>3</sup> The Prison Society has heard an alarming number of reports of suicide in the last several months, including in Dauphin, Luzerne, Philadelphia, and Washington county facilities. The reports of suicide we receive are incomplete, and it is safe to assume there have been more.

The scarcity of social support also makes adjustment to and from prison more difficult. Research studies have established that family visiting supports successful reintegration<sup>4</sup> and contributes to a safer prison environment for both staff and people in custody.<sup>5</sup>

The expansion of video-visiting during the pandemic has somewhat counteracted isolation during the pandemic, but we know that technology is not without flaws and that in-person visiting is both preferred and more effective in building

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<sup>3</sup> US National Library of Medicine, National Institute of Health. "Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of Prisoners." Hewson, Shepherd, Hard, and Shaw. June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047235211000900>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2013/may/15/prison-visitation-a-fifty-state-survey/>



connection.<sup>6</sup> In our recent survey of people in PA DOC custody, 63% of respondents who had used video calls experienced problems with their call, either with the technology or getting to the call (i.e. being told after the fact that the call had been set up and, consequently, missing the call). Video visiting should only be used as a supplement to traditional, in-person visits.<sup>7</sup>

### III. THE PRISON SOCIETY IS A RESOURCE

The Prison Society is committed to getting county officials the information needed to ensure the health, safety, and dignity of the people in county custody. If you have questions about this memo, or other topics that you would like us to research, please contact Social Supports Director Kirstin Cornell at [kcornnell@prisonsociety.org](mailto:kcornnell@prisonsociety.org) or 267-892-9204.

You can also sign up on our website, [www.prisonsociety.org](http://www.prisonsociety.org) for our regular emails on issues facing Pennsylvanians in custody and their families. Our website includes a [COVID-19 information page](#) with information on how individual counties are mitigating the virus in prison, and with a list of Frequently Asked Questions that family members ask us. Along with the website, we staff a hotline for families of incarcerated people. You may refer people to us via our COVID-19 information page, the email [info@prisonsociety.org](mailto:info@prisonsociety.org), or 215-564-7447.

**Please let us know of any updates to your visiting rules or COVID-19 restrictions so we can provide accurate information to the families that contact us.**

We are here to help.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2019/06/18/video-failure/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/09/skype-for-jailed-video-calls-prisons-replace-in-person-visits>

