

A Correctional Facility

So, you want to volunteer in...



WORKING IN A PRISON SETTING

—Diana Prokocimer, Dir. Of Testing/NEK Contact

Being a volunteer in the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) with my dogs was very unsettling at first. I only did the 'Prison' setting once but spend most of my time in the 'Work Camp' (lesser offenders) arena.

As a volunteer I had to go through the DOC volunteer origination program. It is a class situation that teaches all the rules of DOC - personal safety, proper dress code (no perfume etc.), what constitutes contraband, what and what not to do in this environment and different situations that might take place. We learn that even a necklace can be harmful, an inmate will play on your emotions, try to cause conflicts between you, staff and other inmates to further their cause or position and even though you are scheduled for a visit, the facility might be in a 'lock down' and you can not stay.

With that in mind, the first order of business is to make sure my car LOCKED. In the admittance area I must be wearing a VT DOC ID badge, sign in, turn over my car keys and hang my coat. Depending on the day and level of security my material, dogs and I maybe searched. Then my visit is announced over the speakers.

They unlock the entrance to the facility and I proceed, alone with my little dogs through the first building that houses the library, computer & dining area. The concrete and steel echo the click, click from the nails of my dogs. I view a few inmates working on projects – they may or may not acknowledge me. I must go through quickly as this area doesn't have a full time guard. I enter the outdoor compound where several inmates are hanging around visiting, working out, playing basket ball etc. We stay outside for a little while. In the winter – it's cold and empty. The next building is the housing area and there is a North & South Unit. Again, depending on the day a guard will direct me to the right Unit.

I am now in the 'living' quarters and the bunk beds are lined up with lockers at the foot of each. There is a guard in the corner. Some guys are sleeping, playing cards, doing models etc. Again, some inmates ignore us and others are friendly and love the dogs. But once I became familiar with the processes it was easier and less frightening and the guys get to know you and open up for conversation. Some want the dogs sit on their bunks, others want to hold them and sometimes they want to walk them. Some of the guys go to their lockers to show me pictures of their dogs and we talk about dog breeds, the importance of good food, exercise, medical care and love. I try to compare dog care to the care and love of a child. Some of the stories they tell me about their pets make me shutter, but I have to stay non-judgmental and offer them different ways and ideas on right way of treating dogs and that abuse hurts just like it would hurt them.

So – I hope – that I can get through to some of these guys the importance of kindness to their pet and maybe it will help the dog and maybe even a child in the future.



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