



FAMM Tips: Legislative Advocacy from Prison

STEP 1: Know that your voice matters, and that you can have an impact on the laws of Pennsylvania. Engaging with state lawmakers from prison is legislative advocacy. Pennsylvania has its own House of Representatives, Senate, and governor, and each plays a critical role in making laws that affect sentences and prisons. To become law, bills must be approved by committees, passed by both the House and Senate, and signed by the governor. Lawmakers are elected by people in the districts they represent, and care about what people think (especially registered voters). They keep track of how many people contact them about different issues. Since these laws affect you, your voice should be heard. It can change hearts and minds.

STEP 2: Decide what pending bill or issue you want to advocate. Think about your own experience. For ideas, see FAMM’s “Legislative Updates” in *Graterfriends*, or have your family and friends check our website (<https://famm.org/our-work/states-where-we-are-working/pennsylvania/>).

STEP 3: Identify your lawmakers and their contact information. Check your law library and ask your family to use FAMM’s “Find Your Lawmaker” tool here: <https://famm.org/actioncenter/>. You may wish to strategically reach out to lawmakers who represent your home or prison district, those who introduced a bill you support or oppose, or those who serve on relevant committees. (For example, the House and Senate Judiciary Committees control most legislation relating to criminal justice reform; the House and Senate Policy Committees decide each party’s biggest priorities; the Sentencing Commission creates sentencing guidelines, etc.). Research the lawmakers if you can.

STEP 4: Decide how to most effectively communicate with lawmakers you want to reach. Common methods of communication include letters, phone calls, emails, and in-person meetings (lawmaker visits to prisons can be *very* impactful). FAMM recommends writing letters as a first step because you can write, review, and edit before you send it. Discuss the bills with others to learn and practice new ways of discussing important issues.

Identify yourself and the type of reform that you want the lawmaker to consider. For example, “Senator _____, my name is _____, and I’m writing to ask you to please support bill _____, which would _____.” Briefly discuss the reasons that you believe the lawmaker should support or oppose the bill. (Examples: “I am 60 years old and sick, and this bill would allow me to go home with my family” or “This bill would give me more educational and vocational training, so I can find a job when I get out”). End the communication by thanking the person for considering your views, and provide your full name and contact information in case they want to reach you. Consider including a photograph of yourself or your loved ones to put a human face on the need for reform.



STEP 5: Consider these guidelines *before* contacting lawmakers: Review your communication before you send it. It is helpful to write what you want to say, then reread it a few days later. Ask a person you trust to review it. Verify the person's proper title, name spelling, address, etc. Keep the communication focused on one issue. Don't communicate with the same person about the same thing repeatedly. One communication per issue per legislative session (or important phase of the bill) is sufficient. The goal is to get more people doing legislative advocacy, so lawmakers will see that a lot of people care.

Don't communicate anything about the facts of a case that is not final. This means you should not talk about the details of your case if you are awaiting trial, pending appeals, PCRAs, evidentiary hearings, etc. *Communications with lawmakers are not private, and could be used against you in a legal case.* If you decide it is safe to talk about the facts of your case, do not minimize your role. Focus the communication on what you want to change proactively. *Do not spend the communication on negativity.*

STEP 6: After you have seriously considered all guidelines and reviewed your communication, send it. Congratulations, you have now officially engaged in legislative advocacy!

STEP 7: Consider next steps and spread the word. Is there another lawmaker who could impact the same issue? Is there another issue you'd like to support or oppose? Encourage your friends and family to do legislative advocacy. The more people building the movement for reform, the better. Finally, don't forget. Continue advocating after your release. Fill in the gaps for those left behind and advocate in ways you wish others had done for you when you were still in prison. Here's to your voice being heard.

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