

Advocating for the Human Rights of Prisoners

Millhaven Lifers' Liaison Group

The Millhaven Lifers' Liaison Group (MLLG) is an action group of the University of Ottawa chapter of the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG). The group is made up of volunteers from the Ottawa community who visit and establish connections with people serving life sentences at Millhaven Institution, a maximum-security prison in Bath, Ontario. The MLLG's objective is to serve as a bridge between the community and the prisoners, with a view to supporting their eventual release and reintegration.

The group holds regular monthly meetings inside the institution to provide hope to the imprisoned community. Members discuss certain issues primarily related to their needs and ways to address them such as access to information, visitation, food and nutrition, property rights and canteen, workers' rights and pay, health care, lockdowns and "dead time", and religious rights.

Due to the coronavirus, all visits to Correctional Service Canada (CSC) institutions for volunteer groups were suspended during the first wave of the pandemic. As a result, MLLG came up with some innovative alternatives to keep in touch and work in solidarity with the inside members. First, the group started writing letters to the prisoners both as a group and individually. These letters contained words of encouragement, updates on what the group was doing to stay connected with others during the pandemic, the growing use of technology and, most importantly, some humour to lift their spirits through the hard times facing everyone. The group would also update the inside members on outside advocacy activities and prison justice activism. This included advocacy letters and phone calls, pressuring the federal government to safely release federally incarcerated persons to help stop the spread of the novel coronavirus inside Canada's penitentiaries, provide protection for those who remained in custody with personal protective equipment, increase time outside their cells and activities, and expand access to videoconferencing and telephone calls to stay connected with loved ones. We also provided updates about the work of Books to Prisoners Ottawa and planning of Prisoners' Justice Day actions and events on and around August 10th.

To increase contact with the imprisoned community, the MLLG would also leave messages on the "Calls from Home"¹ segment that the CFRC prison radio station offers each week. These messages air every Wednesday from 7:00pm to 8:00pm to connect friends and family with their loved ones behind Kingston's prison walls through the power of community

radio. Through these calls, the Millhaven prison members listen as outside members of the group share words and request songs that they feel would brighten the moods inside the institution. We also provided messages of hope that penitentiary officials would respond to our calls for the safety and humane treatment of the incarcerated population.

Lastly, the group kept up our research, as much possible, with updates from CSC, media reports, and calls to action to ensure that the prisoners are being treated as fairly as possible during these times. The MLLG is currently advocating for increased access to video conferencing for prisoners and their families to keep in better contact with outside supports, as well as for more efficient methods for volunteers to be engaged with people on the inside when monthly visits are prohibited. Although COVID-19 may be the priority right now, the group is also researching things that the prisoners have previously asked about and to come up with solutions to propose once the pandemic eases.

The MLLG members understand that this is an extremely hard time for people who are incarcerated and isolated from the outside community. The MLLG advocates for the prisoners at Millhaven by using our voice and providing recommendations to the Citizen Advisory Committees at CSC and Community Engagement sector at the National Headquarters. The MLLG is also brainstorming ideas and coming up with new ways to reach out to the people inside until they are able to enter institutions again. The MLLG will continue to fight for the rights of prisoners across Turtle Island and join other prison justice groups to support each other in our collective efforts.

ENDNOTES

¹ See <https://cfreprisonradio.wordpress.com/calls-from-home/>.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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