

How Our Advocacy Continues During a Pandemic *Jane Crosby – Books 2 Prisoners Ottawa*

Books 2 Prisoners (B2P) Ottawa has been a working group of the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) at Carleton University since 2016. This working group is a donation based, volunteer-run, letter writing group that acts with the mission of advocacy for incarcerated individuals. Our work supports prisoners' educational, vocational and personal development. This is achieved through responding directly to the correspondence we receive and mailing out book requests sent to us by incarcerated individuals on Turtle Island.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have shifted our regular letter writing/book mailing meetings to an online forum where we are focusing on how to most effectively use our outreach to prisons in Canada. We aim to establish stronger working relationships with program staff inside different institutions to find ways to send literature to prisoners inside Canadian jails, prisons and penitentiaries.

To improve our outreach and advocacy work with community partners, we have expanded our social media use by creating an Instagram account in addition to our Facebook and Twitter platforms. These platforms help us promote our work, recruit volunteers, receive donations for used books and connect with social justice oriented community members.

We are strengthening our administrative function and outreach capacity to do more activism with community partners including the Criminalization and Punishment Education Project (CPEP). We are encouraged with how the group has developed over the last few months and look forward to continuing our work to provide literature and make more connections with incarcerated persons.

In recent correspondence with prisoners, we have answered many of their requests, including making song requests with their local radio stations, as well as sending pads of paper, information pamphlets and other printable games.

The group has been featured in OPIRG-Carleton's Weekly Wednesday mass email to students, staff, and community members. The group has also begun to setup an art supplies bursary for the women's institutions in Canada to help them get materials for their art programs. This has been initiated by working with the Women's Wellness Within Project in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This community connection has provided our first contact at Nova Institution for Women. We are waiting for a response from Nova Institution to provide the bursary once their art program is active again post COVID-19.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the group has also recruited over nine volunteers. This recruitment of new volunteers has been a needed addition to our regular volunteer base. We also rely on the volunteers who are sent to us through a community partnership with the Booth Street Salvation Army Correctional Services. These volunteers are able to complete their court mandated hours by attending bi-monthly meetings with us, writing letters, attending social justice advocacy project meetings and compiling project statistics. Our partnership with Booth Street Correctional Services has remained active over the last few months and we have continued to accept volunteers.

Recently, B2P Ottawa hosted its first Zoom meeting with books to prisoners projects in Vancouver, Montreal and Nova Scotia to strategize how to work collaboratively as a shared social justice collective. We will now work to hold quarterly online virtual meetings, while staying connected to share best practices and find ways to build partnerships across Canada. Through this, we have learned what other groups are doing to stay in contact with prisoners during the coronavirus pandemic, how they send books across the country, relationships they have with their local institutions, and the activism they are engaged in for prison justice. We will continue this work through the creation of a Canadian B2P Alliance where we will refer clients from the eastern, western and central Canada, and find ways to support one another.

Additionally, the group has been working with the CPEP and the Millhaven Lifers' Liaison Group by writing an advocacy letter to Correctional Services Canada (CSC) Commissioner Anne Kelly to demand changes to their COVID-19 response to prisoners in their custody, suggest a stronger connection with prison justice groups who can help support the safe release of prisoners into the community, and propose ways to be engaged in ongoing activities. We also helped to plan Prisoners' Justice Day activities, as well as contributed to the design and sponsored the creation of a PJD t-shirt sold for fundraising purposes. We look forward to continuing our work with incarcerated persons and are encouraged with the future possibilities we see available in our advocacy projects.

CONTACT INFORMATION

University Centre, Room 326
Carleton University
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, Ontario
K1S 5B6

Email:
b2pottawa@gmail.com