

SUPPORTING OUR LOVED ONES GROUP

February 22, 2021

Alaska Reentry & Justice Partnership

Dear Members of the Alaska Reentry & Justice Partnership:

My name is Angela Hall, and I am the President of Supporting Our Loved Ones Group, Inc. We are a non-profit peer support group for the families and friends of incarcerated Alaskans. I am also the wife of an incarcerated Alaskan, Brian F. Hall, who is currently housed at Wildwood Correctional Center in Kenai and is serving a virtual life sentence.

Due to Covid19, and the subsequent decision to suspend visitation in March of 2020 for the safety of our incarcerated loved ones, I have not been able to physically see Brian. Our last visit was in October of 2019. While I wholeheartedly agree it was necessary to suspend contact visitation due to the pandemic, I also believe alternative means of visitation during the suspension should be provided as a means of keeping families whole.

It has been 490 days since I have been able to see, touch, and speak face to face with my husband, and while we often must go months between visits, we have *never* been apart this long in the ten years we have been together. As you can imagine the separation has taken a detrimental toll on us both, as well as our extended family members who also visit regularly.

We have both experienced feelings of depression, anxiety and general sadness throughout the duration of the visitation suspension. The added stress of living with the fear of contracting Covid19, and not knowing whether we will succumb to the virus due to my underlying health issues, and Brian living in a congregate setting with little ability to protect himself from Covid19, has affected not only our physical health, but our mental health as well.

I personally have experienced nightmares, bouts of depression and anxiety which have been exacerbated by the visitation suspension and I have sought mental health counseling in order to learn coping skills as we continue to navigate the long-term effects of the pandemic. Members of our peer support group have been a positive influence throughout the shutdown.

With the lack of programming available during Covid19, Brian has been very fortunate to still be able to participate in hobby craft activities at WCC. He and I are both participating



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in self-taught Lakota language study as part of our spiritual walk. As a trainer/dog obedience handler in the SPOT program, Brian has been able to work with a few dogs during the shutdown. As a long-term resident of the Department of Corrections, he is limited in what programming is available to him and he has been OMP complete for some time, so he is very grateful to be able to participate in these activities at WCC. It has kept him sane during the shutdown as he needs to stay busy and be productive.

Brian is the spiritual advisor for the Native Culture Spiritual Group at WCC. Unfortunately, due to Covid19, the weekly sweat lodge ceremony, has also been suspended leaving many men without the ability to offer prayers and purify themselves in the traditional way. The staff at Wildwood have been working with Brian and others to find safe and reasonable ways for them to practice their spirituality while maintaining CDC recommendations.

The Department of Corrections has provided a number of free calls during the visitation suspension, beginning with two 15-minute calls per week in March 2020. More recently it has been increased to four 15-minute phone calls per week. We are grateful for these free phone calls as they lessen the financial burden already carried by family members. Having phone calls is helpful, but it does not satisfy the basic need for contact and connection with our incarcerated loved ones. It has been especially difficult for those with young children. Our grandson continually asks when he can see his Papaw whom he has come to know through pictures and phone calls.

In speaking with family members, we would like to see various alternatives to contact visitation implemented, such as secure video call conferencing, secure email access, and non-contact visitation, until such time as contact visitation can safely be reinstated. We would like to see these alternatives kept in place in order to offer greater opportunities for communication to those that cannot travel to visitation regularly. All of these options are available to facilities in the lower 48 and can be securely implemented in Alaska.

We would also like an opportunity to discuss improvements to the current visitation policies and procedures at a future date.

We understand the Department of Corrections is currently in the planning phase to "gradually reopen", and we sincerely hope consideration of the needs of family members and the importance of our role in our loved one's rehabilitation is considered in those plans.

Sincerely,

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