



##VISITAPRISON

**You Don't Know If You Don't Go:
Understanding the Value of Prison Visits**



Introduction

The **#VisitAPrison** initiative is an ongoing campaign to encourage elected officials to visit a prison in their jurisdiction. FAMM first launched the initiative in 2019 and since then hundreds of lawmakers have participated.

Through in-person visits—including tours, participation in programming, small group conversations with incarcerated individuals and staff, and post-visit reflection—the campaign aims to bridge the gap between policymaking and the lived realities of the prison system. FAMM also often connects lawmakers to the families of the people they meet behind the walls.



Lawmakers play a central role in shaping sentencing laws, allocating correctional funding, and overseeing policies that affect millions of incarcerated people and their families. Yet these decisions are often made without direct insight into the conditions inside correctional facilities.

By grounding policy in lived reality, prison visits can help identify gaps between legislative intent and actual outcomes by increasing awareness of:

- Who is incarcerated in America's prisons and for how long;
- The daily living and working conditions experienced by incarcerated people and correctional officers; and
- The impact of incarceration on families as they seek to maintain meaningful connections with their incarcerated loved ones.

Policy Recommendations

Lawmakers are uniquely positioned to address the systemic challenges encountered during prison visits.

This report presents policy recommendations and highlights key areas where firsthand observations can inform more effective policymaking.

- **GOLD KEY ACCESS**
- **FAMILY VISITATION**
- **FAMILY NOTIFICATION**
- **PRISON CONDITIONS, PROGRAMMING, AND PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE**
- **PRISON VISITATION AS A PUBLIC DUTY**

Why #VisitAPrison?

“ —
As a lawmaker, those who are incarcerated are your responsibility ... it's your responsibility to ensure their safety, their well-being, and that they have the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves. So that when they reach their exit of the system, they can walk out of prison and into society and get themselves back into a routine of being a productive citizen.
— ”

Florida Representative Susan L. Valdes, District 64

“ —
Until you hear people's stories, you're not going to get it ... If the people of Pennsylvania could just see what I saw—a minute and a half—of this man telling his story, it would change your heart and your mind.
Prison visits give you credibility as a legislator.
— ”

Pennsylvania Representative Mike Jones, District 93

Gold Key Access

“Gold key” access refers to the privilege or authority granted to lawmakers, that allows them unannounced and unrestricted access to correctional facilities in their state. The legal framework for this authority varies by jurisdiction, but is typically established through state law, state constitutions, or department of corrections policies.

Legislator access to prisons is a critical oversight tool. It enables lawmakers to inspect prison conditions, speak with staff and the incarcerated population, and ensure that facilities are complying with legal and civil standards. Unannounced visits provide an unfiltered view of facility operations that planned visits may not capture.

Gold key access is not equivalent to the transparency and accountability that independent prison oversight offers. However, lawmaker visits to correctional facilities serve as a valuable complement to formal oversight mechanisms, and may be especially important in jurisdictions without an ombudsperson or where political barriers prevent the establishment of independent oversight. As elected officials, unfettered access to the prison system provides a method to independently verify policy implementation and to engage directly with incarcerated constituents.

States should adopt or expand “gold key” access policies that grant lawmakers entry to correctional facilities. FAMM provides model legislation as a starting point for advancing these policies.¹

Many states have “gold key” access policies in place. Alaska² and Florida³ both permit members of the legislature to visit state correctional facilities at their discretion. In the case of Florida, the statute specifies that judges of state courts, state attorneys, and public defenders are also authorized visitors. And many elected officials in Florida make use of this oversight authority. Since the launch of the #VisitAPrison initiative, FAMM is aware of hundreds of visits from elected officials at the state and federal levels.

Family Visitation

Consistent, meaningful visitation opportunities have been called a “prime treatment agent;”⁴ mitigating the harmful consequences of incarceration on family members while supporting rehabilitation and successful reentry.

However, the structural barriers of long travel distances, high transportation costs, and restrictive prison policies can make it difficult for families to see their incarcerated loved ones. As a result, families may go for years without seeing each other. This makes it difficult to keep a family or marriage together, build bonds with children, and reintegrate with family after prison.

Research consistently shows that individuals who maintain family connections during incarceration experience better outcomes, including higher rates of post-release employment⁵, lower rates of substance abuse and depression, and stronger family reunification.⁶ Through family-centered visitation policies that place individuals within a reasonable distance of their families, provide clear and accessible information, and offer flexible scheduling, states can enhance public safety while promoting stability, reducing recidivism, and strengthening community ties.

The barriers to visitation may not be readily apparent to those who have not experienced them directly. Prison visits that include engagement with incarcerated individuals can increase lawmakers’ awareness of the factors that prevent consistent visitation. **States should enact legislation to expand and protect access to regular, meaningful family visitation both in-person and through regular access to phone and videoconferencing, the latter for daily contact and where in-person visitation is not feasible for family.**

In 2018, the federal government acknowledged the value of consistent, meaningful visitation opportunities for incarcerated individuals and their loved ones. The First Step Act (H.R. 5682) required the BOP to place people in prisons no more than 500 driving miles from home unless security designation, programming or health care needs, or bed space limits prevent it. Maintaining family ties has been proven to reduce recidivism and make the public safer. Prior to this policy change, about 1 in 4 people in federal prisons were incarcerated more than 500 miles from home.⁷

Implementation has proved challenging at the federal level due to the sheer size of the country and variability of facility types and risk classifications. FAMM encourages states to adopt a much smaller radius relative to their geographic size, and asks judges and department officials to give deference to family input when determining placements in order to advance family connection and reduce recidivism.

Family Notification

The purpose of family notification legislation is to increase transparency and accountability in a state prison system by establishing policies and procedures to notify the next of kin if a facility goes into lockdown or upon the death, or serious illness or injury, of an individual in custody.

Staffing shortages, overcrowding, and operational disruptions have increased the frequency of lockdowns and emergencies in many prison systems. During lockdowns daily operations are restricted to the point that the people incarcerated in the facility are confined to their cells anywhere from a few hours to days, weeks, or months at a time. During these times and other emergencies such as natural disasters, outbreaks of violence, severe labor shortages, and more,⁸ essential communication systems often fail. This lack of transparency exacerbates the emotional strain of incarceration and undermines trust in the correctional system.

Whether a prison is on lockdown or someone in their custody is experiencing a serious illness or injury, communication is crucial. Family notification policies help close this gap by ensuring timely, accurate communication and reinforcing accountability.

By formalizing communication protocols, these policies provide families with clarity and reassurance while promoting greater transparency within prison systems. **States should adopt family notification laws that require timely communication with designated contacts during emergencies.** This model legislation provides a starting point for crafting policies tailored to each jurisdiction.⁹

Prison Conditions, Programming, and Physical Infrastructure

Staff shortages, poor healthcare, crumbling infrastructure, and other chronic problems have resulted in prisons that are unsafe to live and work in for incarcerated people and correctional staff alike.

For example, many prisons don't have air conditioning at all.¹⁰ In some facilities, temperatures inside can reach well above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, creating serious health consequences for both incarcerated individuals and staff. Limited access to medical and mental health care further exacerbates these risks. In Texas, 13 percent of deaths during warm months between 2001 and 2019 were associated with extreme heat days.¹¹

At the same time, insufficient programming reduces opportunities for personal development and successful reentry. A survey by the Bureau of Justice Statistics revealed that 57 percent of people in state prisons have never participated in educational programming, and many of them cite the reason as never being offered the chance.¹² Factors such as long waitlists, disqualification of individuals with certain conviction types or lengthy sentences, and sometimes the utter lack of programming contradicts what we know about education reducing recidivism and supporting successful reentry.

These conditions shed light on the gap between policy standards and lived reality. Prison visits can play a critical role in bringing these issues into clearer view. **Firsthand observation informs lawmakers' understanding of facility and system-level needs, and supports more targeted investments to improve safety, health outcomes, and rehabilitative opportunities.** States have a responsibility to ensure safe prison conditions.

Why #VisitAPrison?

“

I encourage every District Attorney's office to require their attorneys and prosecutors to go [visit prisons] so that their recommendations are informed and they can visualize, 'This is where I'm sending this person.'

They can ask, 'Is this appropriate? Do you really want to send a person who has redeemable qualities and is capable of rehabilitation to an environment where they're going to be subjected to all the things that go on in prison?'

”

Texas District Attorney Brian Middleton, Fort Bend County

Prison Visitation as a Public Duty

Lawmakers who conduct prison visits are better equipped to identify discrepancies between policy and practice and to return to the legislature with the insight needed to translate observation into action.

Beginning in 2028, judges in **New York State** who serve in criminal and family courts will be required to make at least one meaningful annual visit to a prison, jail, or other detention facility.¹³ The amendment to the Rules of the Chief Judge follows visits to correctional facilities by members of the New York State Office of Court Administration, who observed the value that incarcerated individuals placed on opportunities to interact directly with judges.¹⁴ The rule is the first of its kind in the U.S. and reflects an effort to deepen judicial insight into incarceration conditions, and to promote mutual understanding among the judiciary, corrections systems, and incarcerated individuals.

Prisons operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, with the lives and well-being of tens of thousands of staff and incarcerated people hanging in the balance. Policies mandating prison visits are an essential step toward dismantling the mystique surrounding what happens after a sentence is imposed, and a person leaves the courtroom. Though the value of this practice may be evident, New York is the first state in the nation to consider requiring regular, meaningful visits by all trial judges who make sentencing and detention decisions.

Another example is **Missouri**, where newly elected freshman legislators participate in a statewide bus tour after the election to visit state prisons, meet with local leaders, and better understand the diverse needs of different regions before the legislative session begins. Visits to state-run correctional facilities are included as part of this tour. As Representative Bruce Sassmann (MI-61) notes, “Knowledge adds value to the ultimate decision making process.”¹⁵

Conclusion

FAMM advocates prison visits for the following and their staff:

- Policy makers
- Judges
- Prosecutors and defense attorneys
- Parole boards, clemency boards, and sentencing commissions
- Law enforcement

FAMM believes “You don't know if you don't go.” Prison visits offer decisionmakers the opportunity to listen to the stories of rehabilitation and redemption of incarcerated individuals, and to observe the systemic challenges that manifest in everyday prison life. We encourage lawmakers to visit a prison in their jurisdiction and invite families and advocates to support the #VisitAPrison initiative by contacting their representatives and urging them to do the same.

FAMM Resources

Write to your lawmakers and ask them to #VisitAPrison:

https://secure.everyaction.com/rQ2EeUI56UqsRwvmwls_JQ2

FAMM letter to lawmakers: <https://famm.org/famm-visitaprison-letter-to-lawmakers/>

Lawmaker guide: <https://www.famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/FAMM-VAP-LM-Guide.pdf.pdf>

Family guide: <https://www.famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/FAMM-VAP-Family-Guide-1.pdf>

Inside guide: <https://www.famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/FAMM-VAP-INSIDE-Guide-BW.pdf>

Business guide: <https://famm.org/vap-business-guide/>

Faith-based advocacy guide: <https://www.famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/FAMM-VAP-Faith-Guide.pdf>

Endnotes

1. FAMM. (2026). Gold Key Model Legislation.
<https://www.famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/Golden-Key-Access-Model-Legislation.pdf>
2. State of Alaska Department of Corrections (2020). Administration: Tours and Events Within Institutions. Ch. 105, No. 105.03. <https://doc.alaska.gov/pnp/pdf/105.03.pdf>.
3. Florida Statute 944.23: Persons authorized to visit state prisons.
https://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=0900-0999/0944/Sections/0944.23.html.
4. Holt, N., & Miller, D. (1972). Explorations in inmate-family relationships (No. 46). Sacramento: California Department of Corrections.
5. Fahmy, C., Gricius, M., Chamberlain, A. W., & Wallace, D. (2021). Prison Visitation and the Likelihood of Post-Release Employment. *Crime & Delinquency*, 68(12), 2200-2224.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287211022631>.
6. Lösel F, Markson L, Karen Souza K, Caroline Lanskey C. (2012) "Risk and Protective Factors Associated with the Resettlement of Imprisoned Fathers & their Families." University of Cambridge, Institute of Criminology.
7. FAMM. (2018). "The FIRST STEP Act (H.R. 5682): Good for Families, Prisoners, and Public Safety."
<https://famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/FAMM-FIRST-STEP-Factsheet.pdf>.
8. FAMM. (2025). "Life on Lockdown." <https://www.famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Life-on-Lockdown.pdf>.
9. FAMM. (2026). Family Notification Model Legislation.
<https://www.famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/Family-Notification-Model-Legislation.pdf>
10. Bostian-Posner, S. (2023). "How Can They Beat the Heat When There's No Escape?" FAMM Foundation.
<https://medium.com/famm/how-can-they-beat-the-heat-when-theres-no-escape-5d8a7cecb21d>
11. Skarha J, Dominick A, Spangler K, et al. (2022). Provision of Air Conditioning and Heat-Related Mortality in Texas Prisons. *JAMA Network Open*. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.39849
12. Wang, L. (2022). "The state prison experience: Too much drudgery, not enough opportunity." Prison Policy Initiative.
https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/09/02/prison_opportunities/#:~:text=Among%20the%2057%25%20of%20people,enroll%20in%20basic%20education%20courses.
13. New York State Unified Court System. (2026). News Release: Rule Changes Will Enhance Judicial Visitation Program, Deepening Understanding and Strengthening Connections.
https://webfiles.nycourts.gov/public/2026-06/pr26_11.pdf.
14. New York State Unified Court System. (2025). Memorandum Re: Request for Public Comment.
<https://www.nycourts.gov/LegacyPDFS/rules/comments/pdf/RequestForPublicComment-JudicialPrisonVisits-092925.pdf>.
15. State Representative Bruce Sassmann. (2025). "Freshman Tour." Gasconade County Republican.
<https://www.gasconadecountyrepublican.com/stories/freshman-tour,164413#:~:text=Just%20after%20the%20primary%20of,be%20strengthen%20by%20the%20visit>.