Dear friend,

As 2020 draws to a close, we would like to take a moment to reflect on the changes and challenges of this year. It has been devastating for many: not only are people in prison bearing the brunt of the coronavirus pandemic, but we have been reminded again and again of the many lives lost to police and prison violence each day. Not long ago, a disabled Black man named Walter Wallace was killed by police here in Philadelphia. As our communities grieve, we also cry out for change.

People are tired of our country’s system of mass incarceration, and continue to struggle against it daily. We are humbled to be part of that struggle. Books Through Bars is a simple project, but it rests on the foundational idea that people in prison have the same rights and needs as everyone else. Many of our volunteers join us through a love of reading and a desire to share that appreciation with people on the inside. We hope that by working in solidarity with people in prison, we can educate ourselves about the many ways that prisons cause more harm than good. The coronavirus pandemic has provided a stark example of this: people in prison have little access to personal protective equipment and are made to live in highly unsafe conditions. Prisons are epicenters of the pandemic, representing a disproportionate share of cases.

For our part, adapting to the new normal of the pandemic has shown the resilience of our community. We are enormously grateful for the many volunteers and donors who have helped to keep things going during this difficult time. Thanks to their flexibility and hard work, we were able to mobilize two special mailing projects this year — one to send informational COVID-19 zines to people in prison, and another to send packets of information about applying for federal stimulus funds. We are also using this time to expand our selection of helpful resources, such as legal primers. And of course, we are still sending books.

**We are committed to continuing this work for as long as we can, but we need your support to make it happen.** One way you can help BTB continue sending free books to people in prison is by making a monetary donation this year. Our community’s support makes our work possible, and the vast majority of our funding comes from donations from people like you. Your financial support keeps the lights on over our library of donated books, pays for postage to send packages past prison walls, and allows us to respond to emerging needs as COVID-19 reshapes our world.

This year marks Books Through Bars’ 30th anniversary. It has been a difficult year for many, but we are inspired by the powerful voices speaking up for change, both here in Philadelphia and across the globe. **Please consider making a donation to support our work today.**

In solidarity,

Books Through Bars

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For incarcerated people, COVID has made bad conditions worse

Incarcerated people in PA are dealing with COVID while locked up in institutions that show a brutal disregard for their wellbeing. Many people have written to tell us about the conditions they face, and as one writer put it, they are “hell in plain sight.” We have heard about a lack of masks and cleaning supplies, and about people who are sick but afraid to be tested because of the terrible conditions in quarantine. We have also heard about the day-to-day grind of enduring extended lockdown with absolutely nothing to do. The following was written by an incarcerated person who asked us to share their story anonymously:

“The library is closed and is not sending us any books. The library collected all of our checked out books, so we have nothing to read... We are locked in the cell all day with nothing to do. We get two 45 minute blockouts per day, six days a week, then one day we get only one blockout. All activities are cancelled. No library, no gym, no activities on the block. I asked the psych and unit manager for a notebook to journal in. They told me no. I have become so depressed and everybody is angry all the time. The COs are being extra mean...

I have had no contact with family, no TV, no radio, no newspapers, no library. So I have no contact with the outside world. The staff has told us nothing about how to protect ourselves, except to wear a broken, taped together paper mask... They are charging us $5 to see a nurse about anything. Five dollars is nothing outside of prison, but I get paid $12 a month. Twelve dollars. Imagine almost 50% of your total income for the month paying for one doctor visit, where they don’t even really help you... We were told if we file a grievance, we’ll end up in the hole.”

If you would like to learn more about the COVID outbreak in PA prisons and the conditions faced by incarcerated people, please read the recent articles by Samantha Melamed in the Philadelphia Inquirer, particularly her November 12 piece.

Books Through Bars is sending books and reaching out in new ways

When COVID first hit, we were forced to suspend mailing books for three months, but we have since developed a method for fulfilling requests in a socially-distanced way. Right now book requests are fulfilled by a small number of long-term volunteers who work in pods on alternate days. We have also hired a part-time contractor to help us fulfill requests when volunteers can’t be present. Unfortunately, our capacity is still reduced, and we have had to reduce our service area from mid-Atlantic prisons to just Pennsylvania state prisons.

While we have not been able to send as many books, we have also come up with new ways for volunteers to support prisoners from home. BTB volunteers working from home have mailed more than 4,000 letters to incarcerated people, including informational mailings about COVID, letters of support, and materials to help inmates file for their CARES Act stimulus checks. If you are interested in volunteering to do mailings from home, keep an eye on our social media pages (facebook.com/booksthroughbars and twitter.com/btbphilly) for opportunities!

Without policy change, incarcerated people will continue to face brutal and dehumanizing conditions. But we hear time and again that books can be a lifeline when few sources of support are present. As volunteers, we can do our best to provide incarcerated people with a point of contact in the outside world, and with reading material that can help make life more livable.