

From the chaplain's desk

To all volunteers

July, 2004

Thank you for all you do at our unit for the men incarcerated here. Your ministry is greatly valued by the men, the chaplain, the administration, and our God whom we serve.

We don't all have an opportunity to meet and discuss our ministry on this unit. This note is a meager attempt to bridge the gap. I will be brief, because I know you are busy as I also am busy. A few things need to be covered at this time. These are important, so please share this information with other members of your ministry team.

Logging and recording of volunteer visits:

Many volunteers were recently deleted by Huntsville. Many of you are on the verge of being next. What can you do to keep your name on the "approved" list? Two things: (1) Make sure you visit a TDCJ unit at least once per year; (2) Make sure your visit is logged and reported by the chaplain. Item (1) needs no explanation. Regarding item (2), you need to know how to log your visit so that the chaplain can report it. It is in your best interest to understand how this process works. Doing so, you will increase the chance that your visits will be correctly reported to Huntsville.

Explanation of "signing in and out" at our unit: When you come to the unit, there are two places that you must sign in and out. One of them is the "building" log. All visitors to the unit must sign this log. The other is the "chaplain's log." The chaplain is responsible for reporting volunteer visits to the unit, and the chaplain must use the information you put on the chaplain's log. If you do not sign in and out, and report other information requested, or if your information is not printed clearly, the human being who must read what you wrote may be unable to record your visit to the unit. It is imperative that you learn how to enter your information into the chaplain's log, and that you do so every time you enter the unit.

Most of you don't realize how much information must be reported by the chaplain about each visit by a volunteer. From your log entry, the chaplain has to figure out each of the following pieces of information:

1. Who you are (a clearly printed name and 4-digit social security number are very helpful).
2. What date you came into the unit.
3. What time you came and when you left. The chaplain has to compute how many hours you were there and report that! Using the 24-hour system helps a lot.
4. What program or programs you participated in.
5. How many offenders (approximately) participated in each of the programs.

With a good log entry, the chaplain still has to assemble the pieces in different ways for various reports. With an incomplete log entry, or one that cannot be read, the chaplain either has to guess or give up on recording the information. It all takes a lot of time, even when it is all there. When some is missing, it more than triples the time to record your visit.

The details of how to enter your visit information are available in the chaplain's log book. Please take the time to understand how to enter your visit. If you don't understand, please ask the chaplain about it.

Stay out of trouble:

There are many ways a volunteer can violate TDCJ policy and become "disapproved" for visiting a unit or all units. The training class you attended and the manual you were given covered these, and you are responsible for knowing those policies and observing them. A few policies you need to be especially aware of are:

1. You may not be a volunteer at a unit in which there is an offender you personally know or who is a member of your family. If you are on someone's visitor's list, you cannot volunteer at that unit.
2. You may never give to or receive anything from an offender without going through proper channels of approval. Never put money on the books for an offender at a unit where you volunteer.
3. If an offender makes something in the craft shop there is a process by which you can purchase that item. Follow the process and everyone comes out ahead.
4. Do not agree to receive for parole any offender at a unit where you are a volunteer.
5. You are responsible for knowing what unit(s) you may and may not enter as a volunteer. If you don't know, ask the chaplain if there are restrictions. Things that might restrict you are: you are an ex-offender; you know someone incarcerated at a unit.
6. Do not make contact with an offender's family or friends, whether they are in the free world or incarcerated at some other unit. Keep your contact strictly one-to-one.
7. If you preach or teach at religious services, you must NEVER in any way degrade the beliefs of any religion or any offender. The best advice is not to mention the beliefs of another group, directly or indirectly, even in "good-natured kidding." Any mention of such beliefs should be presented in an un-biased way. Remember that "religion" covers a wide range of belief systems in the TDCJ. "Paganism" to one person is a "religion" to another and has protection under law and TDCJ policy. Degrade it, joke about it — become an ex-volunteer. You may believe as you wish, but as long as you are a volunteer at a TDCJ unit, you are not free to speak in any negative way about another religion or faith group.
8. You must never "proselytize" offenders. That means you cannot tell them they should change their religion, even by an indirect remark.

This is not intended to be a complete list. It is a list of pitfalls that volunteers frequently fall into. Any of them can result in your being disapproved as a volunteer. As much as we appreciate what you do, you must follow policy or exit as a volunteer.

As the chaplain of this unit, I want to retain volunteers — indeed, to support them. That is why I'm reminding you of these pitfalls. I do not wish for any of you to fall into the pit.

Stay in Touch:

To help the chaplain and headquarters, please be sure that when your contact information changes you let Huntsville (or your chaplain) know. Current address and telephone contact information is very important. All it takes is a phone call to Wanda Clay at 936-437-5010.

It is probable that ALL volunteers will have to go through some training on a regular basis to remain on the approved list. The chaplain at the unit will likely conduct the training where you volunteer. By your careful attention to the matters discussed in this newsletter, you will be completing part of the training I intend to ask you to complete as a volunteer on this unit.

May God bless all we do!

Chaplain Edward T. Stoessel,

Unit Chaplain