



**Minnesota Prison
Writing Workshop**

DATE

March 8, 2022

Dear Madame Chair,

My name is Jennifer Bowen and I'm the founder and Artistic Director of Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop (MPWW), a nonprofit provides arts programming inside Minnesota's correctional facilities. I write in support of House Bill MN HF2167, which supports arts programming in prisons. For almost twelve years, and with the Department of Corrections' support, MPWW has worked to foster literary community and a devotion to art inside our state's correctional facilities. We aim to do this through high-quality creative writing classes taught by established artists who are passionate instructors, writers, and performers. Daily we are privileged to see how art has the power to change personal narratives, challenge stereotypes about the incarcerated population, and mend the flawed structure that is our criminal legal system.

Our students are among the state's least seen, most misunderstood, and most silenced citizens. And yet it is through their stories that we truly have a chance to understand crime, trauma, justice, healing, the criminal legal system. It's through their stories—too often not written—that we can best hope for change.

Not only do *we all* need locked-up narratives, incarcerated individuals need the opportunity to craft them. They deserve instruction to help them gain artistry, confidence, and a visible record of achievement. A collective CV of our students' work shows that when given the chance they can and do publish nationally: books, plays, essays, poems, songs, and of course, letters to their sons and daughters. More than accolades, incarcerated individuals involved in arts programming access: community, agency, and *their own humanity*, three things captivity most endangers.

Our professional experience is backed up by a substantial body of research, which shows that arts education in prison has a dramatic positive impact on participants' quality of life and the safety of folks living and working in correctional facilities. Further, dozens of academic studies indicate that arts-in-corrections programs show significant rehabilitative benefits plus long-lasting decreases in recidivism among participants of arts education programming in prisons.

More compelling research exists than I can list in this short testimony, so I'll mention a few significant and representative findings, primarily out of California, which has received state support for arts-in-corrections for over twenty years.

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- Researchers Okelola and Irvine found that disciplinary incidents decreased by 89% after incarcerated people began participating in arts programming in California (2015).
- A 1992 study of writing and drama workshops in an Iowa prison found that 70% of men who participated showed "significant positive change in their relationship with peers and authority figures" (Cleveland, 1992).
- An internal study by the California Department of Corrections found that, one year after being released, 74.2% of participants in the Arts-in-Corrections had "favorable outcomes" (no parole difficulties, no reconvictions), while the rate for all parolees was 42% (California

- [Multiple](#) studies have linked participation in prison-based arts programming to significant decreases in depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, and dramatic increases in self-respect, self-esteem, and sense of purpose. From Florida, to Denver, to California, studies show decreased anger, anxiety, and self-loathing, and increased self-esteem and connection to community.

Over a decade ago when MPWW began, we learned how crucial art is, not just for incarcerated individuals, but for the community that is missing those individuals, and that will welcome them home. A student from our first class told us, "This class saved my life: BTW, not lip service." Another student, from the same first class said, "I honestly believe I have something to offer, something to positive to contribute to the world, and that gift was given to me during class; the written word."

Please support arts programming that will save lives and help *all* Minnesotans realize they have something of value to contribute to the world.

Respectfully,

Jennifer Bowen
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