

Please Note: The information contained in this Guide is not intended as legal advice in any individual's case. There are many exceptions and variations in the parole consideration process. If you have questions, please consult with an experienced parole attorney.

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER OF SUPPORT

This Guide is intended to help you draft a strong letter of support. Letters of support are an important part of the documentation the person you support will provide to the Board in advance of or during their parole consideration hearing.

I. Purpose & Types of Letters of Support

Your letter will show the Board that the person you support has a strong support network. Even if you are far away, your support is important, as it shows the Board that they have positive people in their life. There are three main types of support letters: (1) Parole Plans; (2) General Support; and (3) Testimonial. Each type is discussed below.

Parole Plans: A parole plans letter is one that outlines a specific offer of assistance – residence, employment, transportation, counseling, mentorship, etc. If you are offering any of these types of support, do not hide or bury this information in the letter because this is the most important part of the letter. The information you provide about your offer should be as specific as possible. If you are offering a place to live, state where it is, how many rooms are available, and who else is living there. If you are offering a job, describe where it is, what they will be doing in that job, and what the starting pay is.

If the person you support struggled with substance use at the time of the life crime, the letter might also identify places nearby where treatment can be obtained, including the locations of A.A. and/or N.A. meetings and mental health care providers. This information is critical for showing the Board where the person you support would seek this type of assistance once out on parole.

General Support: A general support letter is one that offers general support, including financial support, emotional and spiritual support, or connections to necessary services or resources in the community. If you are offering financial or emotional support, be specific and explain how you will provide that. For example, you will send a monthly check for \$100; you will call every week; you will attend 12 Step meetings or church together, etc. If you are offering to connect the person you support with other services or resources, be as specific as you can about what those services or resources are, and how you will do that.

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Testimonial: A testimonial letter is one that comes from someone familiar with the case over a long period of time, but this is generally not a family member and/or friend. Typical writers of testimonial letters include the defense attorney, judge or prosecutor at the time of trial, investigating officers, or jurors. These letters, unlike parole plans or general support letters, may be able to explain the parole candidate's role in the life crime without appearing overly biased in the individual's favor. Many times, the people involved at the time of trial did not expect the individual to remain in prison decades later, and many times they will explain why the individual has done enough time for his or her role in the crime. Since some of these letters will be from the same part of the community as the Board, their input may be very influential.

Testimonial letters may also come from within the prison community. Educational or vocational instructors, volunteers in self-help and therapy programs, work supervisors, and other people in prison who have been helped by the person seeking parole offer some of the best current evidence of how an individual gets along with others and how he or she approaches his or her responsibilities. Many times, these people have had the opportunity to observe a particular individual over a long period of time and can either talk about positive changes they have observed or discuss the individual's consistently positive conduct throughout a variety of situations. These letters can also help minimize the impact of negative information, such as 115s or 128s, either by providing important background information or by explaining how the individual has changed in the period since those write-ups occurred.

II. What to Include in Your Letter & Where to Send It

Regardless of the type of letter that you are providing, below are some guidelines on the information that you should include in your letter, how to format and address it, and where and when to send it.

What to Include in Your Letter

- At the top of the letter, include the date, your full name, and contact information (address, phone, and email). You can also add a title: "Letter of Support for [Full Name] [CDC Number]."
- Open with "Dear Commissioners" or "To the Board of Parole Hearings."
- State who you are and how you are related to the person for whom you are writing the letter. If you have stayed in contact over the years, it is helpful to say that.
- Briefly explain your personal knowledge of how the person for whom you are writing the letter has positively changed during their incarceration, and why you believe they are ready to be released.
- At the end of your letter, please write your full name and sign it.

What *Not* to Include in Your Letter

- Do not say anything to suggest that the crime was not serious, or that the person for whom you are writing had only limited or accidental involvement, or that they are serving too much time. Do not refer to the crime as a “mistake.” Do not state that the person for whom you are writing has always been a “model prisoner,” especially if that has not always been true. The Board tends to give little weight to such statements when made by supporters, and may even react negatively if the person’s prison record has not been consistently positive.
- Do not say anything that sounds like you are directing the Board how to do their job. Instead, focus on helping them see how much you care about the person for whom you are writing the letter, the positive things you personally know about them, and how you will provide support.

When and Where to Send Your Support Letter

People preparing to go to the Board should start gathering support letters once they know their hearing will be scheduled within 8 or 10 months. Ideally, your letter of support should be dated no earlier than 6 to 8 months in advance of the hearing. If you have written a letter of support for a prior hearing, you should either write an updated version or a short letter to say that your support (or offer) from the prior letter (specify the prior date) is still valid. While the content of the letter can be the same, submitting an update shows the Board that the support you previously offered remains current and reliable.

No matter the date of your letter, you should send your letter to the Board (Board of Parole Hearings, Post Office Box 4036, Sacramento, CA 95812-4036), to the person you support, and to their attorney. At the very least, the person you are supporting should keep a copy of all the letters because, too often, no one else has copies at the time of the hearing. Late letters that get to the individual or their attorney on the eve of the hearing can also be provided to the Board at the time of the hearing. However, sending a letter in advance of the hearing creates a higher likelihood that the Board will have received and read the letter in advance.