

Books To Prisoners Project

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As the total number of prisoners in the United States approaches one million, the demand for literature in prisons is skyrocketing. In response, the Books To Prisoners Project, an all-volunteer, collectively-run distribution service, sends books free on request to incarcerated people in Washington state and across the U.S. But the project always needs help with its mission.

Books To Prisoners is one of only four groups performing this service nationwide. (Other programs exist in Philadelphia, Boston and San Francisco in the U.S., as well as in Vancouver, Canada.) Kris, who has been involved with the collective for six years, says that when she started the project received just under 50 letters a month. By December of last year the mail volume was already up to 500 requests per month and growing. Since all books distributed and all funds used are donated, there is clearly an increasing need for more books and monetary donations in order to provide a good selection of books to all those requesting them.

The Books To Prisoners collective is always looking for publishers, distributors and individuals willing to donate books. Any books, new or used, are accepted, though, according to collective members it's hardest to get current, up-to-date books. One collective member, Dan, emphasizes, "We get a lot of old books. The only law book we have is from 1975. It's really hard to get recent books." Steve, another collective member who has been working on the project for five years now, emphasizes that: "We used to send out three books to everybody who wrote." Now the project needs to be more frugal with both books and postage.

The collective is eager to accept donations of zines and magazines as well. Any publishers with left over magazines or back issues, are welcome to send them to BTP for distribution. And, of course, the project is also looking for monetary donations to help offset postage costs. Even sending the books at the 69 cents per pound library rate, postage costs alone can easily approach \$300 per week.

Book and magazine donations are tax deductible. Occasionally, people have donated their entire book collections to the BTP project. Publisher Chaz Bufe and Pressure Drop Press have both donated large numbers of books. And the project regularly gets extra copies of the newsletter Prison Legal News.

The actual titles that are sent to prisoners are largely determined by the requests that are received for subject areas and types of books. Topping the list of requests, according to collective members, are dictionaries, books on black history, basic grammar, GED books, native American books, and books on philosophy, psychology and foreign languages, as well as anarchism and politics. One of the most requested single titles is the ACLU's Rights of Prisoners book. And legal books in general are always in high demand.

Avram, who has been involved with BTP for two years and who is writing a pamphlet about prison rape, says, "It would be cool to send info out that deals with sexism...We send out thousands of books to people who are rapists or who have been raped." And Kris adds, "Yeah, it would be nice to be able to send more books out to people about issues...rather than just sending novels."

Unfortunately, some prisons won't allow used books to be sent to inmates, and some prisons refuse all hardcover books. Another collective member, Lori, who has been working with BTP for three years, adds that "A lot of prisons won't let us send in photocopies" either. And, of course, prison censorship can take many forms. The most censored zine so far has been the Moorish Science Monitor. Lori adds that, "Especially in a prison where we can't get any books to individual prisoners, we'll send them two or three boxes to their library, but we make them pay for the postage at least."

The project has been operating now for 13 years, since the early '80s. Like any other all-volunteer project the amount of work that gets done can vary with the number of people involved and their level of commitment. But right now, the project has an especially good, well-functioning collective that meets once a week.

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