

Hello!

You are receiving this letter because you or a comrade of yours requested more information about Humanities Behind Bars. In what follows, we hope to provide a brief introduction to our program in hopes that you will join our organization! Before letting you know how you can get involved with our work, here is a little background about us:

In 2016, Dr. Meghan McDowell and Dr. Alison Reed co-founded Humanities Behind Bars (HBB) after facilitating a weekly reading group at Norfolk City Jail. As they established this community partnership and educational ties between Old Dominion University (ODU) and the jail, HBB grew into a grassroots collective of teachers, students, activists, and artists committed to imagining a just world. Our work is rooted in community-based education and organizing that centers formerly and currently incarcerated people and their loved ones. Our volunteers are dedicated to serving the professional goals of students on the inside while developing transformative pedagogies (ways of teaching) that inspire healing and holistic (physical, social, mental, emotional, spiritual) visions of social life.

In addition to teaching and learning with students at Norfolk City Jail, Humanities Behind Bars hosts letter-writing hours in order to build solidarity with incarcerated writers across the state of Virginia. Through this pen-pal program, we have also created arts & literary magazines that we showcase at local events. Proceeds from sales go toward our mutual aid fund (more on that below). We also facilitate critical spaces in the Tidewater community, such as a reading and film series for collective study and critique of social injustices. We have also formed a reading group on prison pedagogy. Our political education program thus models our commitment to cultivating inside-outside alliances and abolitionist praxis. Abolitionist praxis means practices that promote the shrinking of systems that harm us and the building up of resources that foster healing and health. We believe people have problems, not that people are problems. Moreover, we co-founded and organize a mutual aid fund, the Tidewater Solidarity Center, which builds networks of care for people impacted by the Prison Industrial Complex. The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is a term we use, following our comrades at Critical Resistance, to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as SIMPLE solutions to COMPLEX economic, social and political problems. We seek to abolish the PIC and its mechanisms of racialized social control of dissenting populations. We advocate for collectively-determined resources and ways of redressing harm that actually support and sustain communities.

In summary, HBB has worked to establish a social justice-oriented education program at Norfolk City Jail, a pen-pal program, and a mutual aid fund to support formerly and currently incarcerated people with basic necessities such as medical care and clothing. Additionally, we have co-hosted an annual toy drive for the children of jailed parents, as well as book drives. HBB has trained over 20 instructors and tutors at Norfolk City Jail. Course offerings at Norfolk City Jail include: music, public speaking, and African American literature. HBB has a national network of formerly and currently incarcerated members and community supporters, including artists, activists, and academics. We hope to continue building our network and hope you will join us in this endeavor!

Collaborating with vital community partnerships and coalitions, HBB has worked to:

- Host film and reading series for ODU students, faculty, and the broader community
- Network with local organizations to build our base of members and supporters
- Organize biweekly letter-writing hours for the pen-pal program
- Facilitate community events and fundraisers including live music and poetry socials
- Train over 20 new teachers and tutors at Norfolk City Jail
- Partner with the Norfolk Catholic Worker and ODU English Honor Society to facilitate two successful book drives
- Give invited presentations on the work and vision of HBB
- Form an HBB Teaching & Advocacy Team
- Launch the Tidewater Solidarity Bail Fund
- Provide new volunteer trainings for potential HBB members and chapters
- Work with new chapter leaders of HBB to extend our model to new sites
- Strengthen our networks of group-based study and mutual aid
- Secure nonprofit status for our organization as well as grants for our creative work
- Produce a printed arts & literary magazine, *Contraband Love*
- Launch a SoundCloud that features original music created by students at Norfolk City Jail (<https://soundcloud.com/humanitiesbehindbars>)

One of our big goals for the future is working to build a community-based reentry network. If you are interested in joining our cause, we would love to have you become a part of our mission! You may write back to the below address if you would like to:

- Request a pen-pal
- Submit creative writing and art for inclusion in a future magazine or to feature on our website (<http://www.humanitiesbehindbars.org/>)
- Connect us with jailhouse lawyers so we can expand our networks of care
- Start organizing radical reading group meetings on the inside
- Offer your ideas of how we can strengthen or expand the program

Humanities Behind Bars  
PO Box 11142  
Norfolk, VA 23517

With nearly 2.5 million people incarcerated in the U.S., 7 million people under correctional control, and 65 million people permanently relegated to second-class citizenship due to criminal records, mass incarceration is undeniably one of the most pressing issues of our time. We hope you will join us and the broader movement to build another world!

Warmly,  
The HBB Team

P.S. You and your loved ones can follow us on social media @humanitiesbehindbars or contact us at [humanitiesbehindbars@gmail.com](mailto:humanitiesbehindbars@gmail.com)