

## Prison Visitation

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Aired:

Virginia's Department of Corrections is the largest agency of state government with a budget of over a billion dollars a year. Its prisons are home to more than 30,000 people. Experts say it's important that those men and women stay in touch with their families to reduce the risk they'll commit new crimes when they get out, keeping in touch isn't easy as Sandy Hausman reports.

Each state prison used to have its own visitation policies, but last year the Department of Corrections decided to centralize the process, requiring would-be visitors to apply online and wait up to 90 days for a team of eight people in Richmond to decide if it was okay for them to go in. Beverly Richardson oversees response to as many as 175 requests a day.

*It typically only takes a minute or so to run a background for someone who has never been charged with anything, but if you have someone that has some type of criminal history at all, it's going to take a while to decipher, especially if they're out of state. Every single state has a different format*

Ironically, a criminal record doesn't prevent people from visiting, although probation could be a problem.

*If you're on probation for a non-violent offense, you can only visit immediate family members. If you're on probation and applying to visit a non-immediate family member, we do not allow that, so you have to be off probation before you can visit, and you have to be out of prison for at least six months.*

And visitors may be required to prove they're related to the inmate – a complicated process in some cases.

*You've stated you've an emancipated minor. We need that documentation from you. We can't confirm your relationship to the offender. We need some documentation from you.*

Which could explain why some prisoners wait more than three months for a visit. That was a case for this inmate, who did not want to give his name. He says he lived in foster care as a kid and before he turned 18 was given a life sentence for murder.

*I was 17 years old, and it was my first serious relationship. My girlfriend was abducted and raped by an individual, and I took that individual's life.*

He's now spent 30 years behind bars. During that time he tracked down some of his biological relatives, and a few were anxious to see him.

*Last year I found the maternal side of my family - my grandmother who lives out of state, and it took her, I guess around the three month mark she got concerned and actually called the warden here, and the warden placed a call to Richmond. Within 2-3 weeks she was approved and came up to see me. It was well over 90 days at that point. As far as the paternal side of my family, they've been trying to see me since August of last year, utilizing the online method of applying for visitation.*

Reporters also face what may seem like arbitrary limits on access to inmates. Five years ago, I was able record interviews with prisoners at the Buckingham Correctional Center, but today I can only do so by phone. The need for so much security puzzles Steve Rosenfield, a lawyer who's been to many state prisons.

*When you think about it, they have a security system that is as modern as you can find, and they should be able to easily allow in a reporter.*

The department employs more than 5,500 guards, and visitors are subject to a pat down search and screening with a metal detector. Still, administrator Beverly Richardson says you can't be too careful.

*We're a very risk averse organization in general, so we want to take as much precautions as possible before they hit the door, so if something happens and some contraband is passed, if we look on that offender's visitation list, we see that one of those people was convicted of something and has a history, then that might lead us in the right direction.*

We asked Richardson how often there's a problem with a visitor to one of the 30,302 people locked up in state prisons. She could recall just three incidents over the course of three years. I'm Sandy Hausman.