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# The Pittsburgh NLG Guide for Legal Hotline Operators

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*[PittsburghNLG.noblogs.org](http://PittsburghNLG.noblogs.org)*

## The Pittsburgh NLG Guide for Legal Hotline Operators

The Pittsburgh chapter of the National Lawyers Guild operates a hotline for arrested protesters to call from jail. The line is staffed only for protests for which we receive requests for legal observers. It will not be answered otherwise. The hotline number is 412-212-6753. Protesters are encouraged to write this number somewhere on an arm or leg before the action begins, so that if they get arrested, and their phones confiscated, they will still have a number to call. Protesters should also call the hotline if they witness arrests or other police brutality. This manual contains guidelines for hotline operators. Please contact us at [pittsburgh@nlg.org](mailto:pittsburgh@nlg.org) with any questions or feedback.

### CONTEXT

Since their inception, the role of the police has been to suppress social movements by hook or by crook. From the labor struggles of the 19th century, to the Palmer raids of 1919, to COINTELPRO, to the mass arrests in DC at Trump's inauguration, law enforcement has invariably attacked anyone fighting for social justice in the US. Conditions are little different today. Following the rise of Trump, and especially since the police murder of George Floyd, arrests at protests have been occurring more frequently, often catching organizers by surprise with little knowledge or experience of legal support. Inflated charges brought with scant or manufactured evidence, even if ultimately dismissed, drain resources from the movement and discourage future participation in activism. To help combat the effects of state repression on radical struggles the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Lawyers Guild is pleased to offer the following guide for legal hotline operators in Allegheny County.

As a hotline operator you are, ideally, part of a broader legal support effort.

Other legal support roles include:

- **Legal observers.** These are the folks you see in fluorescent green hats taking notes at protests. Their job is to document police activity, especially misconduct, to aid in the defense of arrested protesters. If anyone gets arrested an LO should get their full legal name and call it in to the hotline.

- **Court observers.** They sit in the courtroom during arraignments and other court proceedings and take notes. Their records are used to keep track of arrestees throughout their cases to make sure everybody gets the ongoing support they need.

### CHEAT SHEET

**Pittsburgh Municipal Court** (where arraignments are held)

Address: 660 First Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh

Phone number (call to find out when an arrestee is getting arraigned):  
412-350-6720

Docket search page (to look up details of someone's case): [tinyurl.com/padockets](http://tinyurl.com/padockets)

Allegheny County Jail: 412-350-2000

### Allegheny County Public Defenders

Address: 542 Forbes Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh (no physical visits allowed during the pandemic) Web site: [tinyurl.com/alleghenypd](http://tinyurl.com/alleghenypd)

Phone number: 412-350-2401

### Pittsburgh NLG

Email address: [pittsburgh@nlg.org](mailto:pittsburgh@nlg.org)

Listserv: [pghlegal@lists.riseup.net](mailto:pghlegal@lists.riseup.net)

Legal support hotline number: 412-212-6753

### Allegheny County Jail Resources

Allegheny County Jail DOC number lookup: [tinyurl.com/acjsearch](http://tinyurl.com/acjsearch)

Allegheny County Jail mail policies: [tinyurl.com/acjletters](http://tinyurl.com/acjletters)

GTL prepaid phone account: [tinyurl.com/acjphone](http://tinyurl.com/acjphone)

Allegheny County Jail commissary deposit: [tinyurl.com/acjmoney](http://tinyurl.com/acjmoney)

Bukit Bail Fund request form: [tinyurl.com/bukitpgh](http://tinyurl.com/bukitpgh)

dates of interest from the “Date Filed” date pickers (*not* “Calendar Event”). Remember when choosing the date range that arrestees might not get into the system until after midnight on the day they were arrested. The remaining fields can be left blank.

From here you will have to go through the list of cases one by one. You can skip the traffic tickets, which are recognizable by the *absence* of an entry in the OTN (Offense Tracking Number) column. For the remainder, click on the blue “D” icon on the right to open the docket sheet in a new tab as a PDF. Scroll down to the Charges section. The offense date listed beside each charge should correspond to the date of the action. The charges will be those typical of protests. Riot and Failure to Disperse will be the most indicative offenses, but Criminal Mischief, Institutional Vandalism, Recklessly Endangering, Propulsion of Missiles, and Disorderly Conduct are also very common, as is Obstruction of Highways. Resisting Arrest and Aggravated Assault are pretty likely as well. Burglary or Receiving Stolen Property might indicate the cops are trying to pin looting charges on a suspect. Note that this is not an exhaustive list. As an additional check, make sure the Arresting Agency entry near the top of the sheet corresponds to the location of the action.

If everything matches, go ahead and add the arrestee to the Cryptpad spreadsheet. If you are unsure, try to err on the side of inclusiveness. It’s not the end of the world if we temporarily support someone who is caught up in the criminal justice system for actions unrelated to protesting, but it would suck to abandon a protester to the mercies of the police and courts.

Having that list of arrestees makes it much easier to mobilize support quickly. At some point after their arraignment an arrestee’s bail information will appear in the docket. Keep checking back. Any that got bail can be passed along to Bukit Bail Fund, who will bail out any protester they can afford. Their request form can be found at [tinyurl.com/bukitpgh](http://tinyurl.com/bukitpgh). Another local group, Jailbreak, will hold vigil outside the courthouse while people are being released. They can pass along the NLG’s contact information, as well as distribute snacks, cigarettes, bus passes, Lyft rides, and moral support. Jailbreak is a bit harder to get hold of, but there is some membership overlap with the NLG. Send a text to the hotline Signal group if you need to get in touch with them, and someone will reach out.

For instance, observers during arraignments will be the first people to know how much the arrestee's bail is, and what they are being charged with. Court observing was not been possible during the Covid-19 pandemic, but has since resumed.

- **Jail vigil.** Supporters will often gather outside the jail after an arrest, so they can be there with hugs, snacks, and rides home as their friends emerge from captivity. This is also a good opportunity for the legal support team to get additional information from arrestees if needed.

If unexpected arrests occur you may want to mobilize others to fill those roles you aren't in a position to take on yourself. Do not be intimidated by this prospect! People are generally happy to step up in these situations.

As a hotline operator you may find yourself fielding calls from people in any of the above roles, in addition to arrestees. In all cases it is important to record what they tell you. Since the George Floyd uprising we have been using Cryptpad to record information. This is an on-line office suite, similar to Google Docs but more secure, that lets multiple hotline operators collaborate to view and update

arrestee data. Before you start your first hotline shift someone will bring you up to speed on the Cryptpad spreadsheet. In addition to the Cryptpad, hotline operators coordinate via a Signal loop.

## ALLEGHENY COUNTY PROCEDURES

Hotline operators should be prepared to relay this information to protest organizers and other supporters.

Anyone arrested in Allegheny County will be taken to Allegheny County Jail to be booked, and arraigned at the attached Pittsburgh Municipal Court. If bail is imposed at their arraignment and nobody is there to pay it immediately, they will then be processed back into ACJ. Although PMC conducts arraignments around the clock, this process can still take over a day. Arrestees can sometimes make calls from the jail before being arraigned.

Once an arrestee has been booked their information is entered into the court system. At this point you can call the court (412-350-6720) to get an estimate of when they will be arraigned. You will need to give them the arrestee's government name. The estimate they give will probably not be accurate. Usually they are overly optimistic, but sometimes arraignments happen earlier than they predict.

Court observers and other supporters should get there about an hour ahead of time, and be prepared to wait.

The PMC is located at 660 First Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh. You have to go through a metal detector to get in, so leave any weapons or other incriminating items at home. Arraignments take place in a first floor room just past the entrance on the left. Someone in the arraignment court will probably ask what you are doing there. Go ahead and tell them, it shouldn't be a problem.

After arraignment supporters can look up an arrestee's case in the court docket to find out charges, bail amount, and the current status of the case. Again, you will need the arrestee's government name. The PA docket page is at [tinyurl.com/padockets](http://tinyurl.com/padockets).

In Pittsburgh arrested protesters are usually released on their own recognizance or on non-monetary bond. It's important for someone to be there when they get out, both for immediate support, and to find out what they will need going forward - rides to court, child care, lawyers, reminders, etc. In the case of non-monetary bond the arrestee will probably have to check in with pre-trial services on the next business day.

Any large items the arrestee was carrying when they were arrested, such as a backpack or bicycle, are likely to be held at a police station near where they were arrested. They will have to call the station and make an appointment to get it back.

In the rare case of bail the arrestee will be processed into ACJ unless the bail is paid immediately. The judge can at his discretion allow court bond, where you pay 10% of the bail amount, get it back when the case is over, and you are on the hook for the full amount if the defendant doesn't show up. You can always get private bond, where a bail bondsman takes whatever percentage he wants, you never get it back, and he is on the hook for the full amount if the defendant splits. A bail bondsman might also demand collateral, such as someone's house. In this case the house will probably have to have homeowners insurance.

## LAWYERS

The Pittsburgh NLG does not currently have the ability to provide a pro bono lawyer for every protester who gets arrested. The only free alternative to a paid criminal defense lawyer is the Allegheny County Public Defenders Office. These folks are overworked, but very experienced. The downside is that defendants don't

results list click on "More info." The prisoners DOC number will be labeled "Offender ID." ACJ's mail policies can be found on line at [tinyurl.com/acjletters](http://tinyurl.com/acjletters).

**Books:** Allegheny County Jail has small libraries in each housing unit, but almost all reading material for prisoners has to be mailed in from the outside. Books must be paperback, and have to be mailed directly from one of three on-line suppliers: Barnesandnoble.com, Christianbooks.com, or 1-800-The-Books. Again, you need to make sure the prisoner's DOC number is included in the address.

**Phone calls:** You can't place a call to a prisoner at ACJ, they have to call you. In addition your phone must have a prepaid account with GTL, which you can open at [tinyurl.com/acjphone](http://tinyurl.com/acjphone).

**Visits:** In-person visits were discontinued due to the pandemic, and to date not restarted. Lawyers can still conduct legal visits by video.

**Commissary funds:** Prisoners at ACJ are not provided basic staples such as toothpaste or socks, but must buy them at inflated prices from the jail's commissary, using money from a special account maintained by Access Corrections. Money can be deposited in a prisoner's commissary account at Access' web site at [tinyurl.com/acjmoney](http://tinyurl.com/acjmoney), or in person using the machines in the jail lobby. You will need the prisoner's legal name and DOC number.

## MASS ARRESTS

Mass arrest situations, in which the police arrest dozens, or even hundreds of protesters at a single action, present a particular challenge for legal support. Legal observers will often be unable to get the names of all arrestees, and the hotline will likely experience a flood of calls. Booking and arraignments will be even more delayed than normal. Arrestees may not get phone calls as soon as usual, and if they are new to activism may not even have the hotline number. We have found that the best way to locate and track all arrestees in this situation is through the Pennsylvania court's docket search web site.

The docket search web page for both Magisterial District court (where criminal cases begin) and the Court of Common Pleas (where they often end up) is at [tinyurl.com/padockets](http://tinyurl.com/padockets). You can search for an arrestee's name if you know it, or for their docket number to get a particular case, but the most useful function is the date search. Simply choose "Date Filed" from the Search Type list and check the "Advanced Search" box. Then choose "Allegheny" from the county list, and the

their jobs properly. If all else fails, see if you can arrange a noise demonstration outside the jail. This can be very effective, especially if it attracts media attention.

A couple more tips: Some other inmates like to trick new prisoners by advising them to pretend to be suicidal, or addicted to drugs. *Don't* let callers fall for this. They'll end up on suicide watch, which is even worse than normal jail conditions. Also, the bullpen at ACJ, where prisoners wait to be processed, is cold. There isn't much you can do about that as a hotline operator, but if you get a call from, say, a protester who is trapped in a police kettle and about to be arrested, advise them to put on whatever warm layers they have with them. And get their full legal name!

### LONG TERM SUPPORT

In the worst case an arrestee will not be able to make bail and end up in ACJ until their case is over or their bail is reduced. If this happens they will need support in the form of visits, phone calls, letters and other reading material, and commissary funds. Jail is a lonely and alienating place, and outside supporters should do all they can to make their incarcerated friends feel loved and appreciated. As a hotline operator you won't necessarily be involved in ongoing jail support, but you may want to pass the following information along to the friends and families of arrestees.

**Letters:** In addition to being a prisoner's chief source of news and comfort from the outside, letters are a form of social capital in jail. A prisoner who gets lots of mail obviously has friends and is safer from being mistreated by jail staff.

Allegheny County Jail has one of the most restrictive mail policies in the country. Letters must be in black ink on white paper, and are opened and photocopied by mailroom staff. The prisoner only gets the copy. In addition there is a limit of three pages per letter. Make sure to print your full name and return address at the top of the letter. The envelope must also have your return address, as well as the full name and DOC number of the prisoner, as follows:

Inmate Name

DOC Number Allegheny County Jail 950 Second Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15219

You can look up DOC numbers at [vinelink.com](http://vinelink.com). Choose "Pennsylvania" from the list of states on the front page, and then click "Find an Inmate." In the resulting page, enter the person's last and first government names and click "Search." In the

get to pick their own lawyer, but must take whoever is assigned to them. The PD's office will take on any defendant who contacts them from Allegheny County Jail (after sending a paralegal over for a visit). If the defendant is out of jail they must call the PD office at 412-350-2401. Their web site is at [tinyurl.com/allegheypd](http://tinyurl.com/allegheypd).

Any lawyer with a PA bar card, criminal defense specialist or not, can visit a prisoner at ACJ at any time. The Pittsburgh NLG cannot guarantee that lawyers will be available for visits, but if it looks like somebody will be inside for a while it's worth asking. Send an email to our listserv if you're on it, call any legal observers or NLG members you know, and email our contact address at [pittsburgh@nlg.org](mailto:pittsburgh@nlg.org).

### CALLS FROM JAIL

The hotline is a Google Voice number that will be forwarded to your phone when you sign up for a shift. Make sure your phone is charged and you are in an environment reasonably free from noise and other distractions during your shift. All calls from prisoners at ACJ are preceded by a recorded message informing you that the call is from the jail and requiring you to press a number to accept the call. The prisoner can *not* leave a message if you do not pick up, so it is very important to answer every call.

Callers from ACJ may be stressed, traumatized, and anxious to vent. Provide what moral and emotional support you can, while remembering three things. First, call time can be limited, either by jail phone policies (which can change without notice), or by other arrestees needing to use the phone. You need to get all relevant information from them before they get cut off. Second, do not let the caller talk about the circumstances of their arrest, or anything else that could exacerbate their legal troubles if the cops are listening in. Don't be afraid to interrupt them if necessary. Last, **WRITE EVERYTHING DOWN!** Including the time of the call.

At the beginning of each call you should remind the caller of two things - that the line is not secure, and in fact is probably being actively monitored by jail staff, and that you are not the caller's lawyer and cannot give them legal advice. A sample script might go something like this: "*Legal support, this is not a secure line! Please do not say anything you wouldn't want the police to hear. Also I am not your attorney and nothing I say should be taken as legal advice.*"

Next, get the caller's full name (if you don't already have it) and ask if they are experiencing a medical emergency (more on this below). If they are not, get their charges, bail amount, and docket number if they have it handy, but don't waste time if not. As long as you have their name the rest can be looked up on line.

Finally, find out what the caller needs, who they want you to contact, and what you should tell them. You might be asked to get in touch with housemates, family members, friends, employers, and more, to relay a variety of requests. Again, it's important to make a note of all this, because you won't remember it all.

## OTHER CALLS

If multiple arrests occur at a protest the legal support line will field calls from a variety of sources. Often you will have to play these by ear. Try to give information to the people who need it, but also

remember that confidentiality is a must. Not everyone wants the world to know when they have been arrested, and if they do they can post it on Facebook themselves when they get out of jail. A few possibilities include:

- Legal observers calling in names of arrestees. Be sure to write these down clearly. The LO will also have a note of this information, but remember the LO might get arrested too. It's good to have an off- site record.
- Protest organizers calling to find out who has been arrested and what they can do to help. It's probably OK to share arrestee's names with these folks, but stress the need for confidentiality. Pass along relevant legal support tips from this manual.
- Witnesses to arrests and other police brutality. Get their names and contact information, and write down everything they can tell you. Ask whatever clarifying questions are necessary. It's especially important to get the government names of any arrestees. You also might want to direct witnesses to legal observers on scene.
- Supporters or court observers calling in with updates, such as bail amounts, or (hopefully!) releases. Write it down.
- Reporters. Don't give them any information. The police will probably release the names of all arrestees to the media at some point, but don't make their job any easier. If you have the time and inclination you can refer reporters to the protest's media relations team, but if not just say "*Sorry, I can't help you.*" and hang up.

- Police. They are unlikely to call, but if they do tell them nothing.

- Trolls and other random people who have heard the legal support number being announced and are calling out of curiosity or malice. Just hang up on them.

## MEDICAL ISSUES

ACJ policy is to have an intake nurse who examines every inmate who comes in, plus a nurse on every floor. Inmates can supposedly see a nurse whenever they want. Generally you should advise any caller with a medical problem to do so. This is especially true in the case of injuries related to handcuffs being too tight, such as numb, swollen, or discolored hands. People have had to have hands amputated because of this. Lingering pepper spray, another common affliction, is highly uncomfortable but not usually dangerous.

Any prisoner with a head injury is supposed to be examined at a hospital and be medically cleared prior to being transported to ACJ. If a caller reports a head injury ask them if they were medically cleared before being admitted to the jail. If somebody doesn't have their meds the ACJ clinic is supposed to call their pharmacy in order to validate the prescription, and then fill the prescription as it was ordered. This is no longer guaranteed to happen, and jail staff definitely won't restart a prescription that has lapsed.

Since the pandemic, health care at ACJ, always substandard, has become truly atrocious. They are badly understaffed in all departments, but especially in health care positions. Those remaining are either too incompetent to work anywhere else, or simply enjoy bullying and neglecting prisoners. Even those who want to do a good job are often prevented from doing so by jail policies and administrators.

Operators should be prepared to mobilize community pressure to assist anyone who reports experiencing a medical emergency in ACJ. Good record keeping is particularly important here. ACJ kills about one prisoner a month through medical neglect, so as always, write everything down. If a caller reports a serious medical problem that is not being addressed, try to get a lawyer to go in and visit them (see the Lawyers section above).

In addition, alert protest organizers, supporters, the Pittsburgh NLG chapter, and anyone else you can think of to call the jail (412-350-2000) and raise a stink. Outside scrutiny and pressure can work wonders in getting jail bureaucrats to do