

A compassionate release letter is a formal request submitted to a federal judge, asking for the early release of an incarcerated individual due to extraordinary and compelling circumstances. These circumstances may include terminal illness, debilitating medical conditions, advanced age, or family situations that require the incarcerated person's presence. Such letters are vital components of a motion filed under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A), and they can be written by the inmate, a family member, or an attorney.

Inmates seeking compassionate release must first exhaust their administrative remedies – meaning they must request relief from the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) before turning to the courts. Once this process is complete or bypassed (in limited cases), a well-crafted compassionate release letter can support the legal motion with human context, personal detail, and a plea for mercy.

When to Submit a Compassionate Release Letter

Timing and Process

The letter is typically submitted as part of the formal motion to the sentencing court. This can occur:

- After the BOP has denied or failed to act on a request within 30 days
- With supporting documentation, including medical records or family hardship evidence
- Alongside the motion filed by an attorney, the inmate, or a legal advocate

This letter should be attached as an exhibit to the compassionate release motion or included as part of the

filing's body if being submitted pro se (without an attorney).

Who Can Write a Compassionate Release Letter?

Acceptable Authors

- **The inmate** – explaining personal circumstances and showing rehabilitation
- **Family members** – explaining the need for release due to medical, caregiving, or emotional reasons
- **Attorneys or legal advocates** – including factual and legal arguments along with narrative detail
- **Physicians or medical professionals** – providing expert statements or supporting documentation

Multiple letters can be submitted, each from different perspectives, to strengthen the motion.

What Circumstances Qualify for Compassionate Release?

Recognized Legal Categories

According to the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and BOP Program Statement 5050.50, compassionate release may be granted under these categories:

1. **Terminal illness** – Inmate is expected to die within 18 months
2. **Debilitating medical condition** – Physical or cognitive deterioration preventing self-care
3. **Elderly inmate** – Typically 65+ with long-term

incarceration and medical decline

4. **Death or incapacitation of a caregiver** – Leaving minor children or dependents without support
5. **Extraordinary family circumstances** – Including critical illness of a spouse or parent
6. **Other extraordinary and compelling reasons** – As determined by the court

How to Structure a Compassionate Release Letter

Suggested Format

A compelling letter should be clear, concise, and deeply personal. Use the following structure:

1. **Introduction:** Identify yourself and your relationship to the inmate (or self).
2. **Explanation of circumstances:** Detail the reasons why compassionate release is justified.
3. **Support for the inmate:** Emphasize their character, rehabilitation, and lack of danger to society.
4. **Specific request:** Ask the court directly to grant compassionate release.
5. **Closing and gratitude:** Express respect and appreciation for the court's consideration.

What to Include in the Letter

Essential Elements

- **Date** of writing
- **Judge's full name and court address**

- **Defendant's full name**, inmate number, and facility location
- **Explanation of extraordinary or compelling circumstances**
- **Optional enclosures** such as medical letters, family support documents, or release plans

Tone and Language Tips

Dos and Don'ts

- Use respectful and formal language
- Avoid excessive emotion or blaming the system
- Be honest and fact-based while expressing personal impact
- Avoid legal arguments unless you are an attorney

Compassionate Release Letter Template

This template is designed for family members or individuals writing on behalf of the incarcerated person. You may modify this language to reflect medical, family, or rehabilitation circumstances.

[Your Full Name]
[Your Address]
[City, State ZIP Code]
[Email Address]
[Phone Number]
[Date]

The Honorable [Judge's Full Name]
[Name of Court]

[Court Address]
[City, State ZIP Code]

RE: Compassionate Release Request for [Inmate's Full Name,
Inmate Number]

Dear Judge [Last Name],

My name is [Your Full Name], and I am writing to respectfully request compassionate release for my [relationship], [Inmate's Full Name], who is currently incarcerated at [Facility Name], Inmate # [Number].

[Inmate's Name] has been incarcerated since [Year] and is now facing [describe circumstance: terminal illness, severe medical condition, loss of caregiver, etc.]. These conditions constitute extraordinary and compelling reasons for early release, consistent with 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A).

As of [date or recent evaluation], [he/she/they] has been diagnosed with [specific illness or condition], which significantly impairs [his/her/their] ability to care for [himself/herself/themselves]. [Optional: include short quote or statement from a physician or attach a letter.] Given the medical deterioration, incarceration no longer serves the purpose of the original sentence.

[Inmate's Name] has demonstrated genuine rehabilitation through [describe relevant programs, behavior, support network, etc.]. If granted release, [he/she/they] will reside with [caregiver or housing plan] at [address], and will have access to [medical care, community support, etc.].

We respectfully ask that you grant this request for compassionate release. I am grateful for your time and consideration of [Inmate's Name]'s situation.

Sincerely,
[Your Full Name]

Additional Supporting Letters

Strengthen Your Motion

In addition to the main compassionate release letter, including supplementary letters can provide critical context and credibility. These letters demonstrate that the inmate is supported by a broader network and that their release plan is well thought out and safe for the community.

Consider including letters from:

- **Medical professionals:** A treating physician, hospice provider, or prison healthcare official can provide an objective medical opinion confirming the diagnosis, prognosis, and limitations faced by the inmate. This should include specific medical terms, test results, and prognosis timelines when possible.
- **Family caregivers:** A spouse, adult child, or other relative can write to explain the urgent need for the inmate to be present at home – whether for caregiving, to provide financial support, or due to the loss/incapacity of another family member.
- **Reentry plan supporters:** Letters from individuals offering post-release housing, employment, or mentorship help show the inmate will have a structured and supportive environment upon release.
- **Faith leaders or counselors:** These letters can attest to the inmate's rehabilitation, personal growth, and spiritual or emotional readiness to reintegrate into society.

All letters should be signed, dated, and clearly state the writer's relationship to the inmate. Whenever possible, they should include specific, verifiable facts that reinforce the compassionate release request.

Final Tips Before Submitting

Checklist for Effective Submission

A compassionate release motion is only as strong as its documentation and presentation. Before filing, review this final checklist to ensure the request is compelling and complete:

- **Confirm BOP process is satisfied:** Ensure that the inmate has made an initial request to the Bureau of Prisons and either received a denial or waited 30 days without a response before filing with the court.
- **Organize the filing:** Attach the compassionate release letter, supporting letters, medical records, and a proposed release plan as exhibits to the motion. Label everything clearly for the judge's review.
- **Address legal standards:** If you're filing pro se, briefly state that the request is being made under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) and describe the "extraordinary and compelling reasons" in plain language.
- **Proofread every document:** Ensure names, dates, and facts are accurate. Typos or inconsistencies can undermine credibility.
- **Submit through the correct legal channel:** File the motion with the federal court that originally sentenced the inmate. If the inmate has counsel, ensure the attorney submits everything properly via CM/ECF (electronic filing system).
- **Prepare for follow-up:** Monitor the court docket for responses or scheduled hearings. If the inmate is unrepresented, a trusted contact should help track updates and communicate with the court clerk if needed.

Presenting a thorough, compassionate, and well-supported release request can make all the difference in helping an inmate gain early release under the law.