

Social Bio Packet -- The Heart of Participatory Defense

What is a Social Bio Packet?

The **Social Bio Packet** is a collection of documents, letters, photos and even videos that give a picture of you as a whole person--not just a rap sheet.

When is the Social Bio Packet useful?

The packet is crucial at many stages of your case when decisions are being made:

- bail hearing
- negotiation with prosecutor on reduction of bail or of charges
- applying for a diversionary program
- negotiation with back judge on lifting a detainer
- showing your attorney a whole picture of who you are to craft your defense
- sentencing



What goes into a Social Bio Packet?

Everybody's packet will be different. It represents who you are, and everyone is different. It could include any of the following:

- **Education.** Records, such as diplomas, certificates and letters, showing your high school, GED, or college experience, as well as any training you have had outside of school.
- **Work experience.** Documentation of jobs you have had, which can include letters from employers, human resources departments, or colleagues describing the type of work you did, and the dates you worked.
- **Character references.** Letters illustrating your good character are very important. They could be from neighbors, pastors, church members, teachers employers, work colleagues, or others who know and appreciate you.
- **Letters.** Letters explaining any health issues, difficult family issues or other challenges you have overcome. Challenges may be part of letters of character. Also explain any medications you are on, that you would need if incarcerated.
- **Achievements and contributions to the community.** Letters explaining volunteering you have done, or how you have been helpful to people in your community.
- **Responsibilities.** Letters showing what relatives or others you care for or support financially. This will illustrate the hardship that jail would inflict on your dependents.

It is also really important to include **photos**: of your family, of people you take care of, and a photo of each person who writes a character or achievement/contributions letter. Attach the photo to their letter. You can also include **videos** of people/events in your life to show yourself as a whole person.

How should you begin? It is a good idea to talk to your attorney about what items will be most helpful for your packet for the stage of your case and the situation you are in. Then start collecting. People in your Participatory Defense hub can help you with locating a computer, etc. if needed.

What should you do with your bio? Show it to your attorney to screen for any materials that might be harmful to your case. When your Packet is finished, **make copies** of all materials for you, your attorney and court officials. Your attorney will show it to the judge or other court official. Never present it yourself to an official.

Make it attractive and easy to read

It is a good idea to put all your materials into a loose-leaf binder, with the different sections separated by labeled dividers (for example, different sections for Work, Family, Community Activity, etc.). This makes it easy for your attorney, judge, and other court officials to find information quickly and easily.

SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY PACKETS

WHAT IS A SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY PACKET?

A comprehensive packet to show the character of and support for a person facing charges in the courts

WHO IS THE AUDIENCE?

- District Attorney – to lower, change or dismiss charges
- Probation – to recommend sentencing
- Judge – to determine sentencing
- Prison – to determine placement
- Defense Attorney – to better defend their client
- The Person facing charges – for a chance to reflect on their lives and realize their support
- Family and Community – to express and rally support for their loved one

WHEN IS IT USED?

At Any Stage of the Court Case. It can be used for bail hearings to show that the person has community support that will help him/her show up to court; for plea negotiations or sentencing to show alternatives to incarceration and demonstrate support; and/or for youth transfers to juvenile court to show a young person's challenges, community support, and capacity to grow.

WHAT SHOULD A SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY PACKET ADDRESS?

These are some of the themes that a social biography packet could address. It should be developed *with the person facing charges, the family and the defense attorney* so that it can be effectively used.

- Public Safety Concerns
- Chance of Reoffending
- Support in the Family and Community
- Future Prospects
- Remorse/ Recognition of the Seriousness of the Incident



MOASENI JR. LEASIOLAGI
Family and Community Support

WHAT ARE SAMPLE DOCUMENTS TO GATHER?

Make sure the documents address the themes that the packet is highlighting. These should be vetted through the attorney.

- Character Letters
- Pictures of the person
- Certificates of Program completion
- School records
- Awards
- Positive newspaper or other media clippings
- School records
- Immigration records (especially if the person was a victim of crime)
- Medical records demonstrating health issues
- Mental health records
- Paystubs
- Letters offering acceptance to school, employment, programs
- Rent paystubs

OUTLINE OF A GOOD CHARACTER LETTER OF SUPPORT

DATE IT August 5, 2015

ADDRESS IT “Honorable Judge” or “Dear District Attorney” or “To Whom It May Concern”,

INTRODUCE YOURSELF *Introduce yourself and who you are. Establish yourself. Who’s in your family? What do you do for a living? How long have you lived in the community? Do you own a business and how long? Introduce how you know the person facing charges and your relationship to them. Say how long you’ve known that person.*

My name is Cecilia Sanchez, and I am writing in support of my younger brother Luis who is currently facing charges in your court. Including Luis, there are three children in our family, and I am the eldest. I am also a mother to 4 children and have been married for 12 years to my husband Ramon. I am a schoolteacher at Happy Days Elementary School where I have been teaching first grade for 10 years. I am a lifelong San Jose resident, and we have lived in the same neighborhood since we were children.

DESCRIBE THE PERSON *Name 2-3 words that come to mind when you think about the person. Think about specific examples that help support that. Write a paragraph each on that.*

Luis is a person who always puts others first. Every month, he sets aside a portion of his salary so that he can pay our mom’s electricity bill. Sometimes, even when he is short on money and has to choose between gas for his car or paying her utility bill, he’ll walk to work so that his mom can keep the lights on at her home.

IF APPROPRIATE, RECOGNIZE THE INCIDENT. *Do not talk about the details of the case, but if it’s appropriate, recognize the seriousness of the incident. This has to be done in conjunction with the defense attorney.*

I understand that the charges in this case are extremely serious. I know Luis has expressed extreme sorrow for the incident, and he has shared with me that he understands the impact this has had on everyone involved.

EXPRESS SUPPORT FOR THE PERSON. *This is where you can get detailed on the kind of support you can provide for the person.*

As his sister, I am more than happy to provide a roof over his head as Luis tries to get back on his feet. I will help drive him to appointments, make sure we keep a home that is alcohol and drug free, and ensure that he will be a productive member to our home, our society, and community. I will help him find a job, help him open a savings account, and also ensure that he meets all his conditions of probation so he can succeed.

THANK THEM. *Thank them for reading the letter and give basic contact information so they can reach you.*

Thank you so much for reading this letter. You can reach me at (xxx)-xxx-xxxx if you need more information.