



June 2, 2022

Ms. Lisa Monaco
Deputy Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

Dear Deputy Attorney General Monaco:

We write on behalf of thousands of incarcerated individuals for whom access to books is a safe, productive, and life-changing activity during their periods of incarceration. We are very concerned about reports from our members, as well as the experience of Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, that at least four federal facilities have rejected packages of books sent through the mail or have restricted access to one particular vendor. The single vendor offers only a limited selection of literature and at a prohibitive cost. This only underscores the larger issue of prohibiting outside individuals and organizations, such as Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, from ordering and paying for books for the incarcerated readers. One or more facilities have posted notices about the new restrictions. Thus far, we are aware of these practices at the following facilities: FCI Beckley, FCI Manchester, FCI Schuylkill, and most recently, USP McCreary. We are deeply concerned that more facilities may follow suit.

In response to an inquiry letter, one Warden explained that the book ban resulted from a “high number of both drug related incidents and attempted drug introductions through incoming mail.” See Exhibit A.

Given the severity of the restrictions being put in place, we hope that you could shed light on the magnitude of this problem.

1. How many instances of drugs being introduced into prison facilities by way of book deliveries from publishers, like Barnes & Noble, or distributors, like Amazon, have been documented?
2. Which vendors were the source of the documented instances? (i.e., Amazon, Barnes & Noble, etc.)
3. Has anyone been injured as a result of the drugs brought in through book deliveries? If so, how many people have been injured?
4. What alternatives did Wardens explore before deciding that banning books from the nation’s largest publishers and distributors was the best option?

Although we understand that the Warden has discretion under Program Statement 5265.14 to establish policies that protect the security of each institution, access to a wealth of literary resources in prison is critically important and reduces violence and recidivism.

We appreciate you taking the time to answer these questions and look forward to learning more from your responses.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signatures of Kevin Ring and Tara Libert in black ink.

Kevin Ring
President
FAMM

Tara Libert
Co-founder and Executive Director
Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop

Exhibit A

From: MCR-ExecAssistant-S (BOP) <MCR-ExecAssistant-S@bop.gov>
Date: Mon, Mar 7, 2022, 1:18 PM
Subject: Re: [EXTERNAL] Access to Newspapers/Magazines/Books at USP McCreary
To: Tara Libert <taralibert@freemindsbookclub.org>

Due to the high number of both drug related incidents and attempted drug introductions through the incoming mail, USP McCreary has implemented several new procedures. The mail procedures recently implemented at USP McCreary are authorized in accordance with Program Statement 5265.14, Correspondence, Section 4(a) which states, "The Warden shall establish and exercise controls to protect individuals, and the security, discipline, and good order of the institution. The size, complexity, and security level of the institution, the degree of sophistication of the inmates confined, and other variables require flexibility in correspondence procedures. All Wardens shall establish open general correspondence procedures."

The procedures established have been implemented in order to prevent the possible introduction of narcotics or contraband into the institution. Under Policy, these procedures are warranted and allowable for the security, discipline and good order of the institution.

J. Hensley
Executive Assistant / Camp Administrator
United States Penitentiary
McCreary, Kentucky
606.354.7003

From: Tara Libert <taralibert@freemindsbookclub.org>
Sent: Tuesday, February 22, 2022 2:28 PM
To: MCR-ExecAssistant (BOP) <MCR-ExecAssistant@bop.gov>; MCR-ExecAssistant-S (BOP) <MCR-ExecAssistant-S@bop.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Access to Newspapers/Magazines/Books at USP McCreary

Dear Warden Gomez,

My name is Tara Libert, and I am the Executive Director of Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, an award-winning nonprofit that runs an educational correspondence program with incarcerated individuals. I am writing to you today regarding the mailing policies at USP McCreary; we have recently been informed that we are no longer permitted to send books or magazines—essential educational materials—to members of our program incarcerated at USP McCreary.

Is it possible for our organization to get an exemption from this policy prohibiting organizations from sending books purchased directly from bookstores and publishers? Here at Free Minds, we specialize in reaching new readers and introducing them to the many benefits of reading and writing. Many of our members have never read a book from cover to cover before joining Free Minds. As a book club, we create a community of readers through reading books, and discussing these books through correspondence with our staff and volunteers. Through books, our members gain a greater understanding of the world and of themselves. They are able to reflect on their pasts and educate themselves to prepare for the future.

We have been informed that this policy will take effect next month, March 2022. We ask that you allow incarcerated individuals to receive books through Free Minds as they are educational and support rehabilitation. If we want incarcerated people to return to society as healthy, productive individuals, we need to ensure access to education and rehabilitation every step of the way.

If for any reason this request cannot be granted, I ask that you send the official memo or order that prohibits books from being sent in. I would like to understand why educational books cannot be sent in at this time. I look forward to hearing from you and continuing our shared mission of providing incarcerated individuals with the support that they need.

Sincerely,
Tara Libert
Co-founder & Executive Director
Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop