

Access to Mail in Pennsylvania Prisons: Good for Families and Public Safety

Overview: Communicating by mail is the most cost-effective option for families to stay connected with their loved ones in prison. However, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' (DOC) newly-implemented mail policy bans prisoners from receiving original copies of letters and photos sent from their loved ones and makes it harder for families and prisoners to maintain ties. These policies were put in place in response to several instances of drugs entering prisons through letters. While it is important not to have drugs entering our prisons, Pennsylvania's prison mail restrictions are excessive, expensive, and damaging to family ties.

Maintaining family ties reduces recidivism and supports successful reentry

- When prisoners are able to maintain connections with their family members, they are more likely to have a successful reentry into their communities after prison.
- Research shows that prisoners who keep contact with their family members through letters and visitation are less likely to reoffend.¹

Mail communication is the most cost-effective way to maintain family connections

- For many families, mail communication is the only means of maintaining contact with incarcerated loved ones because it is the most affordable option.
- A 2015 report that surveyed formerly incarcerated individuals and family members of former prisoners found that more than one in three families went into debt to maintain connections through phone calls and visitations.²

Restricting access to mail is costly to taxpayers

- Pennsylvania's new mail scanning policy costs taxpayers \$376,000 a month (over \$4.5 million a year), and prisoners report receiving copies of mail that are incomplete, cut off, and illegible.
- Using taxpayer dollars to restrict prisoners' access to mail diverts resources away from education and drug treatment programs that rehabilitate prisoners and reduce drug use in prison.

¹ Urban Institute, "[Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry](#)," June 2005.

² Saneta deVuono-powell, Chris Schweidler, Alicia Walters, and Azadeh Zohrabi. "[Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families](#)." Oakland, CA: Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design, 2015.

