



July 31, 2020

Director David Shinn
Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry
1601 W. Jefferson St.
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Dear Director Shinn:

We write on behalf of the hundreds of Arizona families and incarcerated people for which our two organizations advocate to urge you to rescind Department Order 207 (effective July 9, 2020), which changes the ADCRR's policy on media access to people and staff in prison. The new order limits media interaction with incarcerated people to postal mail or electronic mail via a tablet – both of which cost prisoners money and are not confidential means of communicating. The new order also prohibits ADCRR staff from responding to media inquiries on or off duty and subjects them to discipline for failing to alert the ADCRR of a media inquiry.

This policy change was unexpected and released without notice or explanation. Assuming that security was the driving concern behind the policy change, we appreciate that security is always a top priority in Arizona prison facilities, and we share your desire that Arizona prisons be safe places for both correctional staff and incarcerated people. It is for exactly this reason that we object to recent policy changes that would penalize correctional staff for speaking with reporters and make it more difficult and costly for incarcerated people to speak with members of the media. During the unprecedented and frightening challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic in Arizona prisons, incarcerated people, staff, and their families need more information – not less – about what is happening inside ADCRR facilities.

The prior policy allowed prisoners low- or no-cost in-person and telephone access to the media at your facilities and did not discourage staff from talking with media. These policies increased transparency and accountability and even led to improvements in ADCRR management. Media coverage of staff and prisoner concerns or complaints that are, for whatever reason, not being aired or addressed through normal grievance channels is vital to ensuring that these problems can come to light publicly and be addressed either by you and your staff or by lawmakers at the state capitol. Indeed, we have seen you and your staff respond with corrective action to media coverage of, for example, insufficient personal protective equipment for staff and prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic. While some media coverage of staff or prisoner concerns or grievances may prove embarrassing or inconvenient for the ADCRR, it also can and does spur improvements, correct errors, and confirm or dispel rumors, which is in everyone's interest.

Generous media access policies also allow greater coverage of prisoner stories that shed light on important issues unrelated to prison management. Prisoners have compelling stories to share with the media regarding the impact of incarceration on their families, communities, and personal rehabilitation. The new policy makes it more difficult for incarcerated people to share their family's struggles, their personal successes, or explain to interested media how they are making the most of their time inside so that they do not return after they leave. While the ADCRR will undoubtedly publicize its own successes through its communications department, incarcerated people have no such resources. At a minimum, they should be able to contact the media more easily and cheaply than the recent policy changes will allow.

Prisons are already places cut off from their communities and the families of both staff and prisoners. Department Order 207 makes ADCRR operations more opaque at a time when families are terrified for their loved ones' health and safety and unable to see them physically or communicate with them regularly. Facilities are locked down, with rumors and fear running rampant inside. Media coverage of the COVID-19 crisis behind bars has been one of the only ways families can learn of the conditions and challenges their loved ones face – and how ADCRR is responding.

We ask that you rescind Department Order 207 and restore the previous policy. Limiting media access limits transparency that is essential to maintain the safety and well-being of 42,000 incarcerated people, thousands of staff, and communities that are home to prison facilities. It is also a disservice to Arizona taxpayers who pay more than one billion dollars annually for the ADCRR and deserve to know what kind of environment and results their money is creating.

Thank you for considering our views, and please contact us if we can be helpful to you or your staff on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Molly Gill
Vice President of Policy, FAMM

Lillian Coppess
President, The S.T.A.R.T. Project