

STAYING CONNECTED WITH MAIL IS VITAL for those incarcerated and their families

POSITIVE AND STRONG FAMILY CONNECTIONS CAN:



Promote physical and psychological health



Reduce the harm of parental incarceration on children



Help incarcerated individuals find housing and employment after release



Reduce the risk of re-incarceration



Despite the many benefits, staying in touch with incarcerated loved ones is still a significant obstacle for families. Although in-person visitation is still the gold standard, the COVID-19 pandemic has even further restricted a practice that is already difficult and costly, especially for those who are incarcerated far from their families. Meanwhile, the cost of phone calls can be exorbitant and phone access has also been restricted due to the pandemic. And, while some states have moved toward the use of electronic messaging services like JPay, these too have drawbacks.

DRAWBACKS TO ELECTRONIC MESSAGING:



High costs



Lack of access to the necessary technology



Access to shared kiosks for receiving messages is restricted, particularly due to COVID-19

Officials cite the need to keep contraband out of prison as one rationale for this. However, research suggests the majority of drugs and contraband enter facilities by other means. Accordingly, the current practice in some places of banning certain forms of mail entirely (e.g. letters and artwork) isn't likely to address such problems, but could have serious detrimental effects on the emotional wellbeing of those incarcerated and their families. However, even in places where postal mail is allowed, with limited correctional staff, the inspection process creates a bottleneck that slows down the timely receipt of mail considerably.

One way officials have attempted to facilitate postal communication is to contract with a third party to process the original form of mail. But, this too, has the unintended consequence of creating an unnecessarily circuitous route. For example, while most first-class mail travels directly from point A to point B, the path of a letter mailed to a Pennsylvania correctional facility might look more like this:



Family member



Scanned by a company in Florida, Smart Communications



Digitally sent to printers at each state prison



Printed and given to addressed individual

Because it's the most affordable method, postal mail has historically been the primary form of communication particularly between incarcerated parents and their children. But, even this process can be unnecessarily restrictive and inefficient, as all letters—and even postcards—coming into and out of jails and prisons must be inspected prior to reaching their intended recipient.

Over 100 correctional facilities across the United States contract with Smart Communications to provide similar communication services. This process is long and inefficient, but it also causes delays or certain issues that mean family communications don't arrive in a timely—or even legible—fashion, as incarcerated individuals and their families have reported delays in mail delivery, poor-quality scans and missing pages in their mail.

One promising option to address these issues while protecting the safety and integrity of the mail itself is to contract with approved third-party vendors (like Shutterfly, Snapfish, Inkcards, Pigeonly or Touchnote), which allow families to upload their photos to the companies that send them directly to those in prison. This cuts out the middle man and does away with the need for careful inspection, as the mail is coming directly from third-party services rather than private individuals.

But these services aren't used as widely as they could be. This is primarily because the third-party vendors must first be added to an "authorized provider/vendor list." But, it is not always clear how companies can request to be an approved vendor for many prison services, and usually, only a few large companies are approved.

Making it easier for companies to be placed on an authorized provider list will:



Create a free and open market, which would drive down rates and make use of these services easier and cheaper for incarcerated individuals and their families



Would allow correctional leaders to reallocate staff time and fiscal resources toward other duties that advance rehabilitation and facility safety



Encourage the development of phone-based applications that provide mobile-to-print options, which provide a safe, easy and convenient mechanism for communication.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Facilitating family connections is in everyone's best interests. Pro-social family connections can make facilities safer, improve the psychological health of those behind bars, and even lead to a lower likelihood of re-offense. Improving mail options is therefore commonsense correctional policy. Accordingly, facilities that wish to pave the way should consider:



Continuing to permit USPS mail (usually the cheapest option) and prioritizing rapid and complete receipt and distribution of mail



Limiting contracts that include kickbacks or site commissions to prisons, as these have a perverse role in driving up prices



Improving the transparency and ease of the process for companies to be placed on an approved-vendors list



Preventing mail, phone or video visitation from replacing in-person visitation, except in very specific cases wherein public health concerns require temporary suspensions



Offering a diversity of options for families to connect with their incarcerated loved ones.

CONTACT US

For more information on this subject, contact the R Street Institute, 1212 New York Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20005, 202-525-5717.



Nila Bala
Associate Director, Criminal
Justice & Civil Liberties; Resident
Senior Fellow
nbala@rstreet.org