



Jails to limit inmate mail to postcards only

By Bill Oram, The Oregonian

December 29, 2009, 4:07PM

Heidi Boghosian receives hundreds of letters each week from inmates across the country. Most are looking for someone to help them or just to hear their stories.

"The quality of the letters are so touching because they're looking to establish relationships with anyone who will listen to them," said Boghosian, the executive director of the New York-based **National Lawyer's Guild**, which publishes the **Jailhouse Lawyers Handbook**.

Boghosian, and other civil rights advocates, are concerned about a policy that 12 Oregon counties, including Washington and Clackamas, will implement next month restricting inmates' outgoing social mail to postcards. By spring, incoming mail will also be limited to postcards.

Washington and Clackamas county officials paint the move to envelope-free mail as a cost-cutting measure that will make jail operations more efficient. Incoming mail will not have to be opened, and postcards will make it more difficult for contraband to be smuggled into the jail, Washington County Jail Cmdr. **Marie Tyler** said.

Inmates will be able to buy each 5-by-8-and-a-half-inch postcard, with postage included, for 55 cents. The rule will only apply to personal mail. Official correspondence, such as letters to and from lawyers and job information, can still be sent in envelopes.

Jail representatives said they did not know exactly how much money the policy shift would save.

Clackamas County Sheriff's Lt. Lee Eby said the postcard system will free up a jail staffer from examining incoming mail and allow that person to do other administrative jobs.

"We always need more staff and we deal with what we have," he said. "Being able to shift some of these critical duties to office staff would be beneficial for us."

That is a short-term perspective on an issue that could have lasting consequences, said **Jann Carson**, associate director of the ACLU of Oregon.

"I do believe they will save some money, but what's the long-term effect of that cost savings?" she said.

Moving away from traditional mail is a national trend that started in 2007 in Arizona's Maricopa County, where **Sheriff Joe Arpaio** has earned fame and the moniker "America's Toughest Sheriff" for tactics such as making inmates wear pink underwear.

"I think it's an unfortunate policy," said Carson. "Because I think one of the important factors for helping someone who's been in trouble and has to serve jail or prison time is if they can stay connected with their family and the community on the outside."

After considering the proposal, Multnomah County leaders agreed and chose not to make the change, a sheriff's office spokesperson said.

"We just want them to have open communication with their family and loved ones and a postcard limits

Inmate mail restrictions

Counties restricting inmate mail to postcards after the first of the year:

- Benton, Clackamas, Columbia, Curry, Deschutes, Harney, Jackson, Josephine, Malheur, Tillamook, Umatilla, Washington
 - Counties that plan to institute the policy in the future:
 - Coos, Douglas, Jefferson, Lane, Lincoln, Linn, NORCOR (Gilliam, Wasco, Sherman, Hood River), Yamhill
- Source: Marion County Sheriff's Office*

communication with less space," Lt. Mary Lindstrand said.

However, Tyler and Eby said there will be no limit to the number of postcards that can be sent out. As for the lack of privacy, Eby said inmates already give up most of their rights to privacy when they are put in jail.

"To say their privacy is gone is pretty ridiculous," Eby said. "If they want to say emotional stuff they can."

Boghosian maintained that prisoners will not be able to express themselves in a single postcard and said it is part of a "trend to depersonalize those who are incarcerated."

She said a strong case could be made that inmates' First Amendment rights are being violated by the policy, despite the dismissals of previous legal objections.

"It curtails their right to write to us in a very detailed fashion," Boghosian said. "I would say that would be a very good First Amendment argument."

Adam Lovell, who runs the Florida-based Web site **WriteAPrisoner.com**, said the rule change is "illogical" and "draconian." His site coordinates pen pals for people in jail. He said, it is therapeutic for inmates to be able to discuss their feelings, which they aren't usually able to do with fellow inmates.

"It's a whole other world inside and the anchors out here are very, very critical to them," he said.

-- **Bill Oram**

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