

# PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE

## JAIL POSTCARD-ONLY MAIL POLICIES

Over the past five years, dozens of local jails in at least 13 states have adopted a harmful new policy that mandates that personal written correspondence to or from jail take place via postcard. Contrary to what some jail officials insist, alternative forms of contact cannot replace the important communication that is possible via letter. These policies constitute a major shift in how mail is handled, stifling the most economically feasible method of communication to and from jails.

### Bad for families:

- Jail postcard-only policies prevent families and friends from sharing personal or timely information with each other because content must be sent on multiple postcards that are on public display throughout the mailing process.
- Postcard requirements are particularly harmful to parent-child communication.
- Postcard policies place an economic burden on the disproportionately poor families that have an incarcerated family member because each word written on a postcard is about 34 times as expensive as a word written on paper and mailed in an envelope.

### Bad for society:

- Postcard-only policies strain the social ties that are essential for facilitating reentry and preventing recidivism, including family relationships, employment connections, housing and childcare arrangements, and social and rehabilitative services.
- Sheriff's offices offer — at best — vague claims about how suppressing mail reaps cost savings. Social science research has consistently found that not allowing incarcerated people to maintain meaningful communication leads to the significant social and economic costs of rising jail populations and increased levels of reoffending.
- Because jails serve many different purposes and contain a diverse population, it impossible to craft a postcard-only restriction that anticipates and makes exceptions for all essential communication.

### Contrary to correctional and detention best practices:

- Immigration and Customs Enforcement's national standards require that "[f]acilities shall not limit detainees to postcards and shall allow envelope mailings."<sup>1</sup>
- The leading U.S. correctional professional association, the American Correctional Association, says that letters are of "tremendous importance to the inmate" and that facilities should encourage correspondence.<sup>2</sup>



*This fact sheet is based on the Prison Policy Initiative's 2013 report, "Return to Sender: Postcard-only Mail Policies in Jail," available at <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/postcards/>*

<sup>1</sup> Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "5.1 Correspondence and Other Mail" in *2011 Operations Manual ICE Performance-Based National Detention Standards* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011), 276.

<sup>2</sup> American Correctional Association, *Manual of Correctional Standards* (Washington D.C.: American Correctional Association, 1966), 545.

- The American Jail Association “fully supports programs that encourage offenders to maintain contact with their friends and family.”<sup>3</sup>
- The American Bar Association notes “[m]ail is a crucial method by which prisoners maintain and build familial and community ties.”<sup>4</sup>
- A spokesperson for the Sheriff’s Department of Los Angeles, which oversees the largest jail system in the country, explained why they wouldn’t consider implementing a postcard-only restriction: “We believe the mail coming to inmates is as important as their phone calls. If we were to limit the mail, we believe we would see a rise in mental challenges, maybe even violence.”<sup>5</sup>
- The vast majority of the more than 3,200 local jails, and all 1,821 state and federal prisons, manage secure mail systems without dramatic postcard restrictions.

## Solutions:

- 1) All jails should allow communication via letter and envelope.
- 2) State regulatory agencies that are responsible for jail oversight should prohibit postcard-only mail policies.
- 3) Professional correctional associations should refuse to accredit correctional facilities with postcard-only mail policies.
- 4) Immigrations and Customs Enforcement should refuse to enter into or renew contracts with facilities that violate national detention standards by enforcing postcard-only mail restrictions.
- 5) State departments of corrections and federal agencies should refuse to contract with local jails that have adopted postcard-only mail policies.

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3 American Jail Association Resolution, “Adult/Juvenile Offender Access to Telephones,” adopted May 3, 2008. Accessed November 4, 2012 from: <http://www.aca.org/government/policyresolution/view.asp?ID=2&printview=1>.

4 American Bar Association, Standard 23-8.6 “Written communications,” *ABA Standards for Criminal Justice: Treatment of Prisoners, 3rd edition* (Washington D.C.: American Bar Association, 2011), 266.

5 Steve Whitmore, quoted in Associated Press, “Ventura County jail limits inmates to postcards,” *Ventura County Star*, September 24, 2010. Accessed October 20, 2012 from: <http://www.vcstar.com/news/2010/sep/24/ventura-county-jail-limits-inmates-to-postcards/>.