

PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE

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Commissioner Luis S. Spencer
Massachusetts Department of Corrections
50 Maple Street,
Suite 3
Milford, MA 01757 -3698

October 22, 2013

Dear Commissioner Spencer,

I am the Executive Director of the Prison Policy Initiative based in Easthampton, Massachusetts, and I write to strongly urge the Massachusetts Department of Corrections to immediately cancel the plan to use narcotic detection dogs to screen people, including visitors, as they pass through the security screening “traps” at Department of Corrections facilities.

I sent a letter in March, when I first learned of the proposal to use screening dogs, expressing my concern this screening policy will unnecessarily deter family visits and thereby make it harder for people released from custody to successfully rejoin their communities. I was disturbed to learn this week that the Department of Corrections plans to begin the using dogs next month.

As I explained in my previous correspondence, social science research has repeatedly found that allowing incarcerated people to preserve family and community ties is essential for facilitating reentry and reducing recidivism. In-person visits allow family members to stay in touch and maintain their relationships through periods of incarceration.¹ Using dogs, particularly to search family members, friends, clergy, volunteers, and other visitors, is deeply invasive and degrading, and can turn essential family visits into potentially traumatizing experiences. Subjecting visitors to dog screening not only harmful, but also unnecessary, as the vast majority of correctional systems around the country maintain secure facilities without resorting to such extreme measures.

Additionally, the nation’s leading correctional professional organizations all agree that correctional facilities should encourage, not discourage, community members who wish to visit their loved ones in prison. The American Correctional Association, for example, urges correctional facilities to support “successful family and community reunification.”² The Re-Entry Policy

¹ See, for example, Minnesota Department of Corrections, *Effects of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism*, November 2011. Available at: <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/publications/documents/11-11MNPPrisonVisitationStudy.pdf>

² American Correctional Association, "Public Correctional Policy on Reentry of Offenders," resolution 2001-3, passed August 15, 2001, reviewed and amended Aug. 16, 2006 and August 6, 2011. Published in American Correctional Association, *Public Correctional Policies 2012*, 79. Available at: https://www.aca.org/government/policyresolution/PDFs/Public_Correctional_Policies.pdf.

Council, a joint project of the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, created to facilitate incarcerated individuals' reintegration in the community, recommends that correctional institutions “help to re-establish, expand, and strengthen relationships between prisoners and their families.”³

The Department of Corrections’ dog sniffing screening policy runs in entirely the wrong direction. Rather than encourage, it will discourage crucial family contact, impeding reentry and contributing to increased recidivism. It should be canceled immediately. Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Wagner', with a stylized, cursive script.

Peter Wagner

CC: Governor Deval Patrick and Chief of Staff Brendon Ryan;
Andrea Cabral, Executive Secretary of Public Safety.

³ Council of State Governments, Reentry Policy Council, Policy Statement 13 in *Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council: Charting the Safe and Successful Return of Prisoners to the Community* (New York: Council of State Governments, January 2005). Available at: <http://www.reentrypolicy.org/Report/PartII/ChapterII-B/PolicyStatement13/>.