## Letters banned at county jail



Written by Chuck Kurtz

Wednesday, 18 February 2009 00:00

Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night may stop nor hamper the delivery of mail, but come March 1, the Johnson County Sheriff's Department is going to change what type of mail can be delivered to or sent out by inmates.

In an effort to save time and to cut down on contraband, only standard-sized postcards will be allowed unless it is legal or "privileged" mail, said **Tom Erickson**, sheriff's department spokesman.

"There have been some counties in Texas and Arizona that have gone to this type of system and they have seen less contraband coming in and out of the facilities and it is taking less time to sort the mail," he said. "By going to postcards versus envelopes with paper in them, and whatever else, it will dramatically cut down the time it takes to inspect and sort the mail and cut down the contraband in them.

"I'm sure there are ways to get types of contraband in postcards, but there's just not the room with those compared to envelopes."

Postcards must be standard. That means no cardstock, index cards, blank cards, or photographs, and they must be no larger than 5 by 7 inches. All postcards will have their stamps removed and discarded prior to delivery to the inmate and they must have a readable return address.

Legal mail between inmates and attorneys will not be affected by the change.

"The one thing that we are saving is time," Erickson said. "When mail comes into the facility it is X-rayed to make sure there are no bombs, knives or guns, and once that is done, it goes to a civilian employee who goes through every piece of mail to make sure there is no contraband and then sorts the mail.

"It's very time-consuming. We check everything. She goes through the mail every day; that's inspecting the mail coming in and going out of the facility. If we take something out of the envelope, it has to be documented.

"If we didn't do something, we would have had to add another person to do just the mail. We get 800 pieces of mail that has to be opened and inspected

every single day, and then it's sorted."

Erickson said people can be extremely creative in trying to receive or send out prohibited items such as stickers, Polaroid photos, phone cards, explicit photos, drugs, tobacco and food.

"People are pretty inventive when they are trying to sneak things in and out," he said.

"If an inmate wants to get a picture of his or her family, things that can't be sent on a postcard, they still have the ability to make that request to get that type of item in," he said. "If it's approved, it's sent in and inspected."

Packages still will not be accepted without prior approval, and the definition of a package, said Erickson, is any item requiring postage more than the cost of a first class stamp.

Erickson said inmates soon would be told of the change.

"It's like any change we make in the facility, it takes a little bit of an adjustment period," he said. "When we did away with smoking years and years ago, there was an adjustment with that, too.

"It's best for everyone in the end; it's best for us and it's good for the inmates because it's a little less expensive to send postcards."

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written by Patricia Allen, February 18, 2009

Obviously, only letting Johnson County inmates communicate by postcard is NOT "what's good for the inmates." This is all about saving money on the backs of people who have no voice. Tom Erickson, the Sheriff's Department spokesman, compares this with taking away smoking privileges some time ago. That's like comparing oranges and apples. Many of the inmates have very little contact with the outside world and it costs a lot of money to make collect calls. Smoking, on the other hand, is not healthy and intrudes on the rights of others.

Even inmates have families who love them and want to communicate with them. There's just not much room on a postcard no bigger than 5 x 7. This new rule will just make a miserable place even more miserable and is certainly not good for the mental health of those incarcerated. It would seem to me by limiting communication between inmates' families and friends, the Sheriff's Department is trying to further break down bonds with an already isolated population. I think the Johnson County Sheriff could find better ways to save a little money.

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written by Cindy Bartko, February 18, 2009

If the families love them and want to communicate with them, then VISIT them... Quit complaining. Short notes on postcards are better than nothing. Do you really have to write a book everytime you write a CONVICT?

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