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D.C. Politics

D.C. Jail is bringing back intimacy — in a way

By **Abigail Hauslohner** June 24 at 5:46 PM

The [D.C. Jail](#) is bringing intimacy back — in a way.

On Wednesday, the District’s Mayor Muriel E. Bowser announced that the jail would reintroduce face-to-face visits between inmates and their relatives, a practice that was eliminated in 2012 when the jail made video conferencing the rule instead.

Bowser (D) said the new policy, which took some prisoner rights advocates by surprise, reflected her desire to see better reintegration of the District’s prisoner population when they return to the local community.

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“My feeling was — and my feeling has been since the policy changed — was that everybody at D.C. Jail is going to be coming home to a D.C. neighborhood and to their families, and that face-to-face visits help in that reintegration process,” the mayor said. “We want people who have served their time and paid their debt to society to have every chance to come home and be productive parts of their families.”

[*\[Does D.C. need a new jail?\]*](#)

The District’s inmate population is disproportionately black and male, and convictions affect families in the city’s poorest neighborhoods far more than others.

Prisoner rights advocates, as well as the Federal Bureau of Prisons, have long stressed the importance of family visits to both the mental health of prisoners and the maintenance of family ties. Experts increasingly stress the importance of such ties for the rehabilitation of the nation’s most marginalized communities.

“We know that for people who are convicted, that one of the biggest factors in reducing recidivism is increasing family ties,” said Deborah Golden, the director of the D.C. Prisoners’ Rights Project at the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs.

[*\[Virginia to study bringing back parole\]*](#)

Golden said she welcomed the jail’s policy shift, but also worried about the implications of “incentive-based” visits, as the Department of Corrections termed them.

According to the department, in-person visits with family will only be afforded to inmates who have gone at least 30 days without any disciplinary infractions. Department spokeswoman Sylvia Lane said the initiative would provide “incentives for decreased disciplinary infractions.”

Golden worried that mentally handicapped inmates, who are often “unable” to obey rules and are thus frequently the targets of disciplinary measures, would be unfairly excluded from visiting opportunities.

Because the District is not a state, there is no prison located in the city, and the jail’s population consists entirely of inmates awaiting trial, or serving misdemeanor sentences of a year or less, officials say. Convicted felons are

sent to federal prison in other states, sometimes at a great distance from relatives.

That's why advocates of face-to-face visits have long argued that for District inmates in particular, time in the D.C. Jail might provide the only opportunity for such in-person meetings with family before convicts are moved to serve out longer sentences.

When the D.C. Department of Corrections stopped allowing face-to-face visits in 2012, then-director Thomas Hoey argued that video visitations were both safer and \$420,000 cheaper than in-person visits. He also said that video visits eliminated jailhouse tension; limited the passing of contraband; and were actually more comfortable for visitors, who would not have to submit to searches and background checks.

[*\[Read about when the D.C. Jail halted face-to-face family visits\]*](#)

It wasn't clear on Wednesday whether the Department of Corrections now considers Hoey's arguments invalid. Asked about any changes in cost, Lane said that the number of staff would not change with the resumption of in-person visits. She said that "enhanced" training for correctional staff, along with a state-of-the-art scanning system would help mitigate other security risks.

The mayor was also vague.

"I think that there is certainly a balance that has to be struck," she said. "We want our personnel at the jail to be safe. We want all the inmates to be safe. And I know that our officials have put in place a system that they believe will be safe."

"When you talk about dollars and cents," she added, "[Former inmates] place a huge burden on all of our human services."

"So when we make reintegration easier, when we can make people more successful, I think it will actually cost less money," she said.

Abigail Hauslohner covers City Hall for The Washington Post. Previously, she served as the Post's Cairo bureau chief.
