



Concerning Permanent Proposed Change to Rules: 20 Ill. Adm. Code 525: Digitizing Mail

Emmett Sanders, Policy and Advocacy Associate, Prison Policy Initiative

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My name is Emmett Sanders and I am the Policy and Advocacy Associate at Prison Policy Initiative. Prison Policy Initiative is a national non-profit that provides research and advocacy to expose the harms of mass incarceration.

The Prison Policy Initiative strongly supports right of incarcerated people to receive and retain original mail from their families and loved ones. Our [research has consistently shown](#) the importance of maintaining connections with family that physical mail represents, and the impact of these connections on the individual, on the community, and on the prison itself. Given our extensive research on the matter, we urge IDOC to withdraw its proposal to make permanent changes to Rule 20 Ill. Adm. Code 525, which would permanently prevent incarcerated people from receiving physical mail from their loved ones.

Physical mail is a lifeline that connects people in prison to the outside world, and connects people in the outside world to them. It not only has great sentimental value, which should not be ignored, but also has shown to be particularly vital for those experiencing mental health issues. Additionally, while the proposed amendment notes no studies or research to support the efficacy of this suggested permanent rule change, states that have stopped people in prison from receiving physical mail have seen drug-related deaths continue even after physical mail was stopped.

Being able to receive and retain physical mail has been shown to have great benefits for those experiencing mental health issues. [One study](#) found that suicidal people treated in psychiatric hospitals who received caring letters were nearly 50% less likely to commit suicide in the two years following their release from the hospital than those who did not receive letters. Given that [up to 50% of people](#) who die by suicide have made previous attempts, and that there are an estimated 25 attempts for every successful suicide, physical letters which can be revisited and reread at later times stand as a resource to help prevent future deaths.

Physical mail has great, potentially life-saving benefits for those experiencing mental health issues. This is salient for Illinois prisons which has a notably large mental health caseload, yet far too little mental health support. Around 44% of people in IDOC custody are on the mental health caseload, with about a third of them defined as having a serious mental illness. Yet in July of last year, [only around a third](#) of IDOC's budgeted mental health provider positions were filled. In

other words, the many people in Illinois' prison who are struggling with mental health issues already lack sufficient support. Eliminating physical mail stands removes a positive mental health benefit and a lifeline for many.

While the Bureau of Justice Statistics notes the [rate of death](#) from drug and alcohol intoxication in Illinois prisons was 2 per 100K between 2001-2019, the rate of death by suicide over that same time was 16 per 100K, *fully eight times higher*. By far the largest number of non-illness related deaths in IDOC between 2001 and 2019 were from suicide. Per [BJS' report](#), 137 people in prison died from suicide between 2001 and 2019, while just 15 people died from alcohol or drug intoxication. In other words, people in Illinois' prisons are around 90% more likely to die from suicide than from overdose, yet this policy change would take away a vital mental health resource.

Mail scanning has also been shown to have little to no effect on the frequency of overdoses and drug use. Pennsylvania, for instance, saw just a tenth of a percentage difference in drug-tainted mail in the year after implementing mail scanning procedures. Nevertheless, incarcerated individuals testing positive for drugs in the state's prisons [nearly tripled](#) in the five years *after* implementing mail scanning. Missouri eliminated physical mail in July of 2022, yet 2023 saw [30 people die from illegal drugs in prison](#). While there was a slight decrease in deaths overall from the year before, the continuation of drug overdoses and drug related deaths suggests eliminating physical mail is far less effective than mail digitizing companies would lead us to believe. It also suggests, as many have argued and as our [research has shown](#), drugs are often introduced through staff or other means. In fact, per the data submitted by IDOC to JCAR in a memorandum following up on Emergency Rulemaking – 20-525, since 2023, twenty-three IDOC staff have been investigated for drug-related contraband. Only seven of them, or 30%, were cleared of wrongdoing, while a total of eight, around 35%, were either disciplined or chose to resign prior to completion of the investigation.

While many states have made the unfortunate decision to ban physical mail, despite a lack of evidence that doing so actually improves safety, others like Nevada have [legislatively recognized](#) incarcerated people's right to receive original physical mail from their families and children. We urge this committee to join them by rejecting the implementation of these permanent changes to **Rule 20 Ill. Adm. Code 525** and the permanent harm they will bring.