

The Post Editorials

Tablets could aid in inmate reform

No doubt, many will criticize allowing prison inmates in Colorado to use electronic tablets as softhearted and wrong-headed. No doubt, many of those who have been victimized by crime will share that view. We'll say from the outset that, as we take up this question, we definitely sympathize.

Indeed, it came as a rude shock that criminals in lock-up are getting to use tablets to listen to music, play games, text and call friends and loved ones.

Yet a review of the plan to pilot the tablets convinces us this idea is worth trying. As Colorado Department of Corrections Director Rick Raemisch tells us, this program is meant to make Colorado safer and reduce crime. The more we consider the potential for this program, the more we see his point.

As The Denver Post's Kirk Mitchell recently reported, the Colorado Department of Corrections has given 8,000 inmates specially designed wireless tablets with access to a Corrections-controlled library of books, music and non-violent video games. The tablets, which aren't connected to the internet, also allow inmates to send text messages, which are first read by prison guards, to the outside world. The devices also allow phone calls, which, again, are monitored by staff.

No tax money is spent on the program, which is paid for by prisoners every time they text or call. Soon the tablets will be used to offer vocational courses and other programs meant to help prepare the inmates for their eventual release into an increasingly technological world. If the pilot program proves efficacious, it would be expanded within Colorado's 18,000-inmate population and perhaps across the nation.

Raemisch says the tablets help

build technological skills in a population that includes thousands who have never even had a smartphone. The program provides an incredible carrot-and-stick incentive to mind the rules and avoid loss of the devices.

Prisoners already have the right to mail and phone calls, and digital technology makes a lot more sense. The tablets allow staff to more easily and comprehensively screen for violations and coded messages than they are able to do with normal mail. And if the pilot shows that transitioning to electronic communication is workable, prisons would be able to phase out much traditional mail and the problems with contraband it can allow.

As for the entertainment question, it's reasonable enough to think of the program as the contemporary alternative to traditional prison libraries and recreation areas that already offer board games, card games and the like.

Certainly, if prison officials find the tablets are being used for the advancement of criminal enterprises, or otherwise create danger in the cellblock, the program will have to be rethought or scrapped.

But why not try? As Raemisch puts it: Criminals are sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment once they get there. Corrections staff would be wrong to miss the opportunity to reform the many inmates susceptible to change. Prison programs that encourage respect and keep the peace help prepare the 97 percent of inmates who someday will again live among us. We should want them reformed, law-abiding and able to earn a good enough living that they aren't tempted to return to crime.

If the pilot shows the tablets help fulfill that goal, then they're worth continuing.