

Written Public Comment from Drew Lobo (drewmlobo@gmail.com)

My name's Drew and I'm from Redwood City. I believe that the Sheriff's Office should be as transparent as possible regarding investigations into shoplifting, auto theft, and other property crimes, especially in light of the very real civil liberties concerns regarding surveillance through social media and via heightened security camera presence. I'd like to ask the SO to detail the scope and the limits of its investigative powers in regards to large-scale surveillance technology as soon as practicable; I'd also like to request that some high-level, non-sensitive details regarding the ongoing Project Sherlock be made available so that the public gets a sense of the Sheriff's Office's current resource allocation and applications.



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Initiatives to reduce incarceration, to heal harm, and to build communities.

Civilian Advisory Commission
San Mateo County
via email: communityaffairs@smcgov.org

July 11, 2024

RE: Physical Mail Policy at the San Mateo County Jails

Dear Independent Civilian Advisory Commission on the Sheriff's Office,

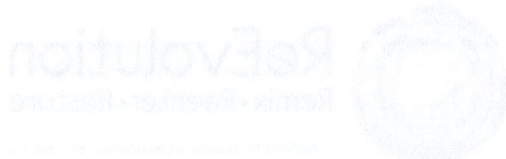
ReEvolution is writing to ask the Independent Civilian Advisory Commission on the Sheriff's Office to look into why people in San Mateo County jails are not allowed to receive physical mail. They cannot receive birthday, Father's/Mother's Day cards, photographs, or drawings from their children, or any other personal mail. Other county jails including San Francisco and Los Angeles allow people to get mail, and we should be able to do that here. But we don't, and it has now turned into a [lawsuit](#) against San Mateo County alleging that the policy violates the expressive, associational, and privacy rights of those in the jail as well as their friends and families. The [complaint](#) states in part, "**physical mail was once a lifeline...**They held letters and drawings that their loved ones also held, and ... frequently re-read mail in the privacy of their cells, when they awoke in the morning or before falling asleep. Many ... relied on physical mail to take correspondence courses, because the physical copies allowed them to annotate readings, fill out worksheets, and send completed coursework back to their instructors. **Now, they have difficulty accessing even digital copies of their mail.** They can access their mail only on shared tablets and kiosks, only in public spaces, and only during limited recreational time...They cannot spend any significant amount of time reading and reflecting on the letters they receive; and they cannot easily return to their correspondence." (The current case status is [here](#).)

How does personal physical mail work?

Prior to 2021, incarcerated people could receive physical mail. But in April 2021, the Sheriff's Office implemented a contract with Smart Communications with little notice to the incarcerated population or their families. Families were now required to mail the cards and letters to Smart Communications in Florida. The company scans and uploads them. Incarcerated people can only view their mail on a shared tablet, and only when the tablet is available. Meanwhile, Smart Communications destroys the originals but keeps the digitized copies for seven years and makes the contents available to Sheriff's Office staff.

Why does the county deny access to physical mail?

The county says that physical mail poses safety risks because of fentanyl. However, the county has not provided any documentation about the frequency of fentanyl arriving in the mail. And [you can't overdose just by touching fentanyl](#). In fact, there are no confirmed cases of overdose from touching fentanyl powder or pills. A [local emergency medicine doctor told the court](#) that fentanyl is not easily absorbed across the skin. "For first responders who encounter suspected fentanyl, I advise that they wear protective gear, such as nitrile gloves and even face masks. Skin exposures can be dealt with by hand washing to remove any powder."



What is the impact?

As the Knight Foundation says, “Physical mail has long been the primary medium of communication between incarcerated people and those most invested in their rehabilitation—their partners, children, religious advisors, educators, and mental health counselors. Jail administrators should not be able to eliminate it arbitrarily.” As [Slate](#) reported in 2021, “The printed scans I collected (from Smart Communications) were low-quality, including blurry, darkened family photos that left incarcerated people unable to make out their loved ones’ faces. Even the more readable scans left much to be desired—because, after all, **physical mail is rarely just about reading. Incarcerated people couldn’t run their fingers over their loved ones’ handwriting, or grasp a piece of paper that had been held by someone familiar...** Personal [testimonies](#) and research alike demonstrate that regular correspondence with the outside world is crucial to an incarcerated person’s mental health while inside prison as well as their ability to successfully reintegrate upon release.”

What do we ask?

We ask that the Commission look at San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other counties that allow physical mail to be received and identify potential solutions that will keep mail secure and also safeguard the rights of incarcerated people to receive mail. A priority of the jail should be helping people successfully reintegrate, not doing things that make recidivism more likely by isolating prisoners from their outside support. We ask the Commission to make recommendations to the Sheriff’s Office and the Board of Supervisors. Where there is a will, there is a way. Unfortunately, this is part of a national trend to outsource and cancel physical mail in jails and prisons, privatizing such functions. But San Mateo County should be able to lead the way in identifying safe and humane solutions to allow incarcerated people to receive and hold on to special cards from their families. Allowing people to receive mail is a good first step in operationalizing a commitment to support the dignity and privacy of incarcerated people while facilitating rehabilitation and connection.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Bocanegra".

Paul Bocanegra
Co-Founder, ReEvolution
209-499-8592

cc:

wslocum@smcgov.org, dcanepa@smcgov.org, ncorzo@smcgov.org, rmueller@smcgov.org,
dpine@smcgov.org, ccorpus@smcgov.org