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Features

Vital communications: Mail Services connects offenders to free world

Although visitation may remain the most desirable form of contact for offenders as well as their families and friends, and the implementation of the Offender Telephone System (OTS) and e-messaging has provided more options for staying in touch with loved ones, written correspondence via the U.S. mail continues to be a vital means of communication in TDCJ and correctional systems across the country.

The agency's Correctional Institutions Division's (CID) Mail Services Coordinator Panel (MSCP) is responsible for overseeing mail service for nearly 150,000 individuals, a pop-



Mailroom clerk Gail McCarn inspects mail before it's delivered to offenders at the Lane Murray Unit.
Photo by Jene Anderson

ulation larger than the city of Waco, spread all across the state. MSCP assists offenders in maintaining contact with family and friends, arranges offenders' access to courts and public officials, provides procedural training and technical assistance to unit mailroom staff and conducts mailroom operational review audits. MSCP manages this critical support function in compliance with federal and state laws, and agency policies.

When asked to explain how offenders communicate with the free world, MSCP Program Supervisor Jennifer Smith replied, "The majority stays in touch with family and friends through written mail, and keeps that communication going even though they can talk to them on the phone and receive e-messages and visit." Smith added, "They're still communicating and we still process quite a bit of mail." In 2011, that "quite a bit" added up to 28.6 million individual pieces of written correspondence, not counting 195,000 incoming packages. The amount of mail handled each year has increased even while the offender population has remained stable and new opportunities for supervised offender communications have been introduced.

Despite the advantages of personal visitation and voice communication through OTS,

low cost and convenience play a large part in the continued popularity of paper-based mail service. Offenders can buy stamps and writing paper in the commissary; indigent offenders can request correspondence supplies from the mail room or law library and reimburse the state if funds become available. Another reason for the popularity of written correspondence is that any offender can send and receive mail, regardless of custody or disciplinary status.

In addition to handling the U.S. mail, unit mailrooms also process correspondence received via the electronic messaging system. Offenders cannot send e-messages, and incoming e-messages go directly to the offender's unit mailroom, where they are printed out and delivered within one or two weekdays. Unit mailrooms received nearly two million e-mail messages for offenders during 2012.

Offenders may also subscribe to approved periodicals. "Any magazine that is not on the approved publication list comes through our office," said Smith.

Security is of course a primary concern. Every piece of mail is opened and inspected prior to being given to the recipient. Legal and special mail is opened in the offender's

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presence and checked for physical contraband. Offenders who abuse the confidentiality accorded to legal and special correspondence by sending threats or substances to government officials are placed on a special correspondence restriction. "They're not allowed to send out any sealed mail addressed to media or special correspondents without us reading it," said Smith.

Secure, regulated contact by means of an effective prison mail system is a normal and necessary part of an offender's successful rehabilitation. CID's mail services help the agency to achieve its mission to promote positive change in offenders by enabling them to correspond with their families, friends, legal representatives and others. ●