

Background for SURJ Action Hour

The current Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ's) policy requires all personal mail to be scanned in a central processing facility. Since TDCJ implemented this policy in the fall of 2023, requiring mail to go through a digital processing center, it has had a significant negative impact on people in prison.

Abolition Apostles believes that relationships between people inside and outside prisons are a lifeline, and have the power to be transformative for both participants. By the Texas Department of Criminal Justice staff's own admission, people in Texas prisons were waiting over two months for incoming mail from their loved ones to be screened during the initial rollout, and we've heard reports of delays of over 3 months. Incarcerated people are still experiencing significant delays compared to mail sent directly to the unit, and changing requirements around which return addresses to use have only made things worse. This policy harms relationships between people in prisons and their family and friends.

In response, we support the following recommendations, shared by the Texas Civil Rights Project in their "2024-2025 Texas Sunset Advisory Commission Review of Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ)" document, as a solution to the ongoing issues with mail in Texas prisons:

- End the mail scanning program and return to traditional paper mail delivery
- Ensure Timely and Accurate Delivery of Legal Mail
- Ensure equitable access to tablets
- Ensure Timely Delivery of Mail and End Policies that Restrict Paper Correspondence
- Make Phone Calls Available for Free

An email template can be found on the second page to send emails to the TDCJ ahead of their April 26th board meeting. After sending an email to the board, feel free to fill out [this google form](#) so Abolition Apostles can tall the total number of emails sent. Thanks so much for taking the time to write an email to the board and for your support!

Email Template

Send emails to: tbcj@tdcj.texas.gov

Dear Chairman Nichols and TDCJ board,

My name is [Name], and I'm a [Texas Resident/ pen pal with Abolition Apostles/concerned citizen/nonprofit leader etc.]. [Share relevant info about pen pal relationship(s) in Texas or other connections to the state].

I'm writing to you ahead of your April board meeting with a concern about the current policy requiring all personal mail to be scanned in a central processing facility. Since TDCJ implemented this policy in the fall of 2023, requiring mail to go through a digital processing center, it has had a significant negative impact on people in prison.

[Replace this paragraph with reasons of your choosing-- see list on page 3 for examples!]

Our collective believes that relationships between people inside and outside prisons are a lifeline, and have the power to be transformative for both participants. By TDCJ staff's own admission, people in Texas prisons were waiting over two months for incoming mail from their loved ones to be screened during the initial rollout. and we've heard reports of delays of over 3 months. Incarcerated people are still experiencing significant delays compared to mail sent directly to the unit, and changing requirements around which return addresses to use have only made things worse. This policy harms relationships between people in prisons and their family and friends.

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I urge you to act and change the policies around mail scanning and communications more generally-- people in prison must have access to physical mail, delivered promptly, to maintain essential social ties while in prison. While I understand that the board

cannot act outside of an open meeting, I hope you'll consider this matter for discussion and provide a response.

Sincerely,

[your name and contact info]

Replace paragraph 2 with any number of anecdotes -- use quotes from inside pen pals in Texas ([found here](#))

- Mail to media outlets has been delayed at the facility-- in one case by 30 days, before being returned to sender for an issue with return addresses. This raises concerns about transparency and accountability to the public if information from in prisons can't reach journalists.
- Veterans' disability benefits have been delivered over a month late
- People who have issues with their tablets cannot get them fixed in a timely manner, which means they may lose access to incoming mail for weeks while they wait for repair or replacements.
- Newly arrived incarcerated people have to wait to receive tablets, denying them access to communication with loved ones in their first weeks, when maintaining contact is critical for mental health and well-being.
- Frequent changes to policy around return addresses have resulted in mail that should have been allowed to be sent out being returned (staff was not up-to-date on policy changes and mistakenly held mail back).
- This policy is minimally effective in accomplishing its stated goal (that is, reducing the transmission of drugs from outside prison to inside). The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections implemented a similar program in the past, and found that 0.7 percent of its incoming prisoner mail was tainted with drugs in August 2018. Since implementing the mail scanning program, the rate as of July 2019 was 0.6 percent.
- People whose family members aren't tech-savvy are stuck waiting for paper mail to go through the processing center-- in some cases increasing the time for mail to arrive by 8-10 times (1 week with regular mail vs. over 2 months with the processing center)
- Feel free to add on other concerns based on the experiences of your pen pals, if applicable.