

ACLU: Oneida County Jail lifts ban on physical mail after intervention, organization asks LaCrosse County Jail to also reconsider policy

Posted on Tuesday, Dec 21, 2021

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MILWAUKEE — The ACLU of Wisconsin today applauded the decision by the Oneida County Jail to reverse its policy that had banned incarcerated people from receiving physical mailed correspondence. The decision was made after the ACLU called the practice a violation of the First Amendment rights of incarcerated people and asked the jail to reconsider the harmful practice in October.

In addition to prohibiting physical mail, the jail was also charging individuals for using its electronic communications services. Jails have contracts with electronic communications vendors that pay the jails a commission for every electronic communication, which incentivizes jails to force people to use electronic communications to increase their revenue.

“We are glad that the Oneida County Jail reversed its policy. It is extremely important for the well-being and mental health of incarcerated people to be able to physically touch and hold a letter written to them by their loved ones, instead of forcing families to send costly digital means of communication,” said Shaadie Ali, interim executive director of the ACLU of Wisconsin. “Mail should be fully accessible to incarcerated people, and their ability to stay in touch with others should never depend on how much money they have.”

The ACLU of Wisconsin has now called on the LaCrosse County Jail, which currently has a similar ban on mail correspondence, and also charges fees for personal communication by email and text, to reconsider its ban.

The ACLU of Wisconsin also applauds recent moves by Wisconsin legislators to address the high costs associated with incarcerated people keeping in contact with their families. This month, Rep. Samba Baldeh from Madison introduced a bill that would move away from charging people expensive rates for phone calls in county jails.

“For incarcerated people, maintaining relationships with friends and family on the outside is a critical part of their ability to endure the conditions of jail and prison,” Ali said. “We should be working to make sending mail, making phone calls, and using other forms of communication as accessible and affordable as possible. Price should never be a barrier for those in custody and their loved ones to stay in touch.”