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Community wants answers: Sheriff implements new policy which ends paper mail in jail, without input from those affected

On April 4, 2021, a letter appeared in the lobby of the Maguire Correctional Facility declaring that by April 26, 2021 all paper communications with incarcerated people would be rejected, with the exception of legal mail. Instead, the letter instructed that any paper mail should be sent to a facility in Sarasota, Florida run by a company called Smart Communications, where it will be opened, scanned, and converted into an electronic version that can then be viewed on a tablet inside the jail. Given that San Mateo County Corrections facilities were already subject to COVID-19 procedures including restricted visitation, the sudden change in policy regarding jail mail and the county's lack of transparency concerned local families. Silicon Valley De-Bug supported one family in asking for a meeting with a representative from the Sheriff's Office on May 11, 2021 to explain the change in policy, but county officials denied the request, saying that they had answered "all the questions."

On June 22, 2021, Silicon Valley De-Bug filed a public records request for the contract and any records regarding the decision to implement the new jail mail policy. After weeks of delay in violation of California law, the county finally produced the contract, but failed to provide other responsive documents. On May 26, through their attorneys at the Social Justice Legal Foundation, Silicon Valley De-Bug submitted a second request to San Mateo County and the Sheriff's Office seeking more comprehensive information on the new policy and its associated procedures.

Incarcerated people and their families deserve multiple options for communication, like electronic messaging on tablets and video visits, but implementing these technologies does not justify eliminating the option to send traditional paper mail. For many incarcerated people, keeping birthday cards, family photographs, or letters that carry the scent of a loved one's perfume is a crucial way to maintain closeness and connection with their support systems. Now, individuals detained in San Mateo County are only able to view a scanned copy of these precious items. With only 176 tablets and up to 800 people incarcerated in the jail, access is heavily limited.

Jennifer Rodriguez, an organizer with Silicon Valley De-Bug, emphasized the emotional toll the policy has already taken on families. "As a member of the community with a loved one incarcerated, I know how important communication and personal connection to my loved one is. It was very frustrating and disheartening to learn that San Mateo County jail would no longer allow pictures or letters to be mailed into the jail directly to my loved one. Receiving greeting cards and pictures for those incarcerated to look at any time of the day to look at is something that brings joy and hope that they know someone cares about them. It's horrible that Sheriff Bolanos did not consider family or the community's input in this matter. Having personal connections is important for rehabilitation."

Another concerning aspect of the county's contract with Smart Communications is a massive expansion of police surveillance enabled by the MailGuard system. According to the policy, a record of all communications are kept for 7 years by Smart Communications in a database which law enforcement may search at any time. In addition, if mail senders opt to track their letters, the company may be able to collect and store other private data and information about them, but more information is needed on the company's exact policies.

Local families have expressed others concerns about the use of Smart Communications and their products, such as chronic technical issues with the tablets and kiosks, lack of internet connection in the jail, and a lack of urgency by the jail in solving these communication issues that leave incarcerated people isolated at the time when they need the most family and community support and connection.

We call on the Sheriff and the county to respond to our records requests promptly, as required by law, and to end the policy and permit paper mail immediately.