



TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY BOARD OF CORRECTIONS

January 10, 2023

My name is Bianca Tylek and I am the Executive Director of Worth Rises, a New York City-based organization working to end the exploitation of incarcerated people and their loved ones. I am submitting written testimony today because my wish to be heard during the live hearing was ignored. **I am writing to urge the board to vote against the DOC's variance requests to eliminate postal mail and restrict packages.**

Inside New York City's jails and around the country, mail and packages are tangible reminders of love. They are particularly important at a time when mental health in our jails is at an all time low and deaths are at an all time high. Nearly half of last years' deaths and 5 out of the last 7 were caused by suicide. Eliminating mail and packages and replacing them with copies or commercial products rips the heart out of both and will make things worse.

The DOC is villainizing families and children as drug traffickers and their letters and care packages as drug carriers to justify the use of the costly services of prison vendors. But the DOC has provided no data to support a widespread issue with contraband entering our jails through mail or packages. A number out of context along with a few provocative anecdotes does not illustrate a systemic issue that would warrant a universal change of this magnitude and one that will cause so much harm. Further, separating people from those who love them is cruel and will likely have an impact opposite to the DOC's stated intention of reducing overdoses.

That's because contraband drugs are not coming in primarily through failed searches of mail and packages, but rather through correctional officers and staff or with their complicity.¹ We saw this play out during the pandemic when visits and packages were largely restricted with little impact on the introduction of contraband. Further, several states and localities have tried this same approach to curb the introduction of contraband drugs to their facilities and failed. Pennsylvania's and Missouri's DOCs have eliminated mail and positive drug tests and overdoses went up after they did so.²

¹ [Federal Prisons' Switch to Scanning Mail is a Surveillance Nightmare](#), The Intercept, September 26, 2021.

² [Drug Interdiction Performance Measures](#), Pennsylvania DOC, August 2020. [Mail scanning: A harsh and exploitative new trend in prisons](#), Prison Policy Initiative, November 17, 2022.

Finally, in 2015, I worked at Rikers Island and personally witnessed correctional officers bringing in contraband. Officers routinely set off metal detectors and their counterparts controlling the security process let them slide. I have seen it with my own two eyes. And drugs do not trigger metal detectors, making their introduction much easier and less noticeable.

The recent trend to eliminate postal mail in prisons and jails is not about the safety of correctional officers or incarcerated people, it's about profits. The board should not acquiesce to the myths being perpetuated by the carceral industry. It is impossible to overdose from fentanyl or fentanyl analogues through accidental skin contact or by being in close proximity alone. Vendors like Securus bundle mail elimination services with other lucrative "services" to drive sales of email, e-books, games, and music. These corporations are also interested in the data they collect about the senders, who are not incarcerated, when digitizing mail. According to their own marketing materials, they are building databases of information about call recipients to sell to law enforcement and other bidders.

Finally, we want to note that this policy may violate federal PREA standards that require survivors to receive their mail "in as confidential a manner as possible;" that incarcerated people with visual, hearing, and learning disabilities are particularly adversely affected by scanned mail policies; and that legal mail, which is legally protected, is sometimes caught up in scans too. This type of issue wouldn't be far-fetched since the DOC plans on relying on the same vendor that illegally recorded and handed over attorney-client calls to prosecutors for this new service.

Addressing the flow of drugs into New York jails is a serious issue, but ignoring the primary source of contraband drugs, denying incarcerated people important connections to family, and wasting taxpayer dollars is in no way a serious solution.

We ask the Board to deny these variance requests and instruct the DOC to come up with alternative ways to address the flow of drugs into DOC facilities, including heightened attention and consequences for staff who bring in contraband, ample training for staff regarding mail and packages search, providing incarcerated people with fentanyl testing strips, and most importantly, mental health support and substance treatment for incarcerated people.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B Tylek', written in a cursive style.

Bianca Tylek
Executive Director
Worth Rises