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Technical alternative to destruction of prisoner mail in NSW

An international company has been servicing other countries, including the USA to solve the issue of contraband being included in prisoner mail. They use non-invasive methods to enable delivery of original correspondence. This issue has been before parliament in NSW due to questions of legality around blanket mail destruction policies, breaches of human rights and disruption of familial relationships.

The VeroVision Mail Screener is a novel solution which would enable the proactive detection and diversion of incoming drugs. This enables law enforcement to take action, facilitating targeted treatment to prisoners for drug addiction. This allows for the delivery of original mail to prisoners who are doing the right thing thus facilitating rehabilitation to reduce recidivism and upholding basic human rights. The use of this technology would enable NSW Corrections to avoid criticism of the legality of current mail policies and is an easy and cost-effective solution.

Executive Summary

The Crimes (Administration of Sentences) Amendment (Inmate Mail) Regulation 2020 (Amendment) was introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic with mail becoming the only physical contact between prisoners and their outside contacts. The exact motivation for the introduction of the Amendment was unclear at the time but appeared to be in response to prohibited goods and drug-related security concerns. In practice, Commissioner Peter Severin ordered that all mail be photocopied and destroyed. With the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and a return to normalcy some four years later this Amendment persists.

There are significant human rights and legal concerns regarding the blanket destruction of prisoner mail which have been detailed [here](#). Of primary importance is the significant negative psychological impact this has on prisoners due to the sentimental value of original mail. These were previously the only artefacts from their families and loved ones allowed to be possessed, carrying the scent of home, a wife's perfume, the lines in a child's drawing. Familial connection is important to reduce recidivism, maintain hope and connection with the outside world and achieve positive outcomes for both the prisoner, their families and the community. The blanket destruction of mail and widespread poor photocopying practices

erodes the quality of communication and connection between prisoners and their loved ones.

A recent report from November 2023 by the NSW Inspector of Custodial Services; [Review of the response to COVID-19 in NSW custody](#) (Report) states:

“We consider that the destruction of inmate mail should cease entirely. The persistent implementation issues mean we cannot support the continuation of this practice, even if it should be found to be lawful. In the absence of evidence that correspondence is imprinted with an illicit substance, original mail should be either provided to the inmate or stored in their property.”

The following recommendation is made in the report:

“CSNSW immediately ceases the destruction of original mail to inmates.”

On 30th January 2024 we drew attention to these findings to Minister for Corrections, Anoulack Chanthivong and Acting Commissioner Leon Taylor. Acting Commissioner Taylor responded affirming the continuation of the policy, citing contraband risk. Upon questioning in the [Budget Estimates hearing](#) on 1st March 2024 Minister Chanthivong responded to concerns about the indiscriminate destruction of prisoner mail by citing concerns over drugs being imprinted on paper, namely buprenorphine.

The primary concern from a Corrections view appears to be the risk of drugs being introduced into facilities through incoming prisoner mail. Research demonstrates that only 1% of mail on average is found to contain contraband, thus 99% of prisoner mail is erroneously withheld and destroyed. Multiple studies have highlighted correctional officers as a major and significant source of contraband including drugs, often in larger quantities than are able to be introduced through other means.¹ Analysis of mail destruction policies in similar Western countries demonstrates a lack of efficacy, with Missouri prisons reporting a 10% increase in drug overdoses just 3 months into a blanket photocopying and mail destruction policy².

In the Australian context, in the [Answer to Supplementary Questions from Minister Chanthivong](#) from the Budget Estimates hearing on 1st March 2024, the instances of identified contraband found in mail as per below is low considering an average NSW prison population of 12,500 prisoners;

- A. 2019-20 - 87
- B. 2020-21 - 37
- C. 2021-22 - 260
- D. 2022-23 - 159
- E. 2023-24 - 53

¹ [Andrew Hagan, 'Behind Bars: The Truth about Drugs in Prisons' \(2017\) 5\(3\) *Forensic Research & Criminology International Journal*.](#)

² [Ryan Krull, 'Overdoses Rise in Missouri Prisons Despite Strict New Mail Policy', *Missouri News* \(Online, 17 October 2022\).](#)

These results show that in the year (2021-2022) following the implementation of the Amendment, contraband actually increased by 226% compared to the year before the policy was introduced. The reason cited for the Amendment is that there was an increase in contraband in mail prior to the Amendment's introduction. However, there were only 87 instances in the 2019-2020 financial year. The Amendment therefore seems to have resulted in an increase in contraband, not a reduction. These results also indicate that the overwhelming majority of prisoners are doing the right thing.

Our proposed technical alternative provides a cost-effective solution at approximately \$150,000USD per unit. This resolves the legal challenges being considered due to current mail destruction policies through provision of original mail, enabling it to maintain its sentimental value. Over the period there is also a 33% reduction in labour costs due to increased efficiency compared to traditional photocopying.

VeroVision Mail Screener

The VeroVision Mail Screener by [Eclipse Screening Technologies](#) provides a fast and effective method to screen mail, including greeting cards, letters and drawings, for illicit drugs and cutting agents using Hyperspectral Imaging (HSI) and unique short-wave infrared (SWIR) filter technology to control the wavelength of light that passes through the filter to the detector. SWIR provides chemical identification in combination with imaging information while remaining non-destructive and non-invasive enabling prisoners to receive the original mail, keeping connection to the outside world.

Material detection includes substances concealed via crayon, glue, paint, soaking of material etc which are all common areas of concern for concealment.

Benefits of the VeroVision Mail Screener include:

- Allows provision of original mail
- Non-invasive and non-damaging detection process
- Reduction in time spent in comparison to photocopying
- Watchlists of high risk mail enable closer monitoring
- Ongoing updates enable detection of emerging drugs and cutting agents
- Detection of illicit drugs enables disruption of organised crime
- Enables targeted treatment for prisoners with drug addiction

Eclipse Screening Technologies

Eclipse Screening Technologies is a US based technology company established by Eclipse Design Ventures in Pennsylvania to address the issue of contraband entering prison via mail. The team is led by experts in hyperspectral imaging including CEO Peter Safran and COO Rebecca Schuler.

Provision of original mail

Original mail contains intangible sentimental value for prisoners and facilitates the maintenance of family relationships through a tangible and physical connection with home and the outside world. Social connectedness promotes adaptive post-release functioning as these relationships can provide the prisoner with social and economic support, impose social obligations, provide informal supervision of the prisoner upon release and enable the prisoner to maintain optimism about life after release.³ The vast majority of prisoners will be released back into society. A priority should thus be placed on ensuring post-release conditions are conducive to rehabilitation and reintegration.

Regular contact through visits and letters has been shown to improve post-release father-child involvement and employment outcomes, reduce post-incarceration drug use, increase compliance with supervision conditions and reduce recidivism.⁴ There are significant connections between pre-release family support and improved post-release mental health outcomes which is enabled through regular family contact (in-person visits, phone calls and letters).⁵

Non-invasive and non-damaging detection process

The VeroVision Mail Screener uses a non-invasive and non-destructive scanning process to identify concealed contraband allowing for the original to be delivered to the prisoner.

Counterfeit privileged mail can be a source of illicit substances. Due to the VeroVision Mail Screener technology, legal and other privileged mail of up to 3 pages in size can potentially be screened without being opened which ensures that confidentiality can be maintained while also enabling greater ability to detect concealed substances from inmate mail.

Time Reduction compared to photocopying

Photocopying is a laborious process causing significant delays in delivery of mail to NSW prisoners with some prisoners reporting delays in excess of one month in receiving mail. NSW prisons are chronically understaffed. Blanket photocopying policy redirects staff from performing other essential duties in an already stretched system with regular lock-ins and staff shortages. The issues with this process are well documented with letters becoming a key source of prisoner complaints post Amendment.

In an independent US study comparing mail screening processes of a letter and its content:

- Visual inspection took an average of 45 seconds
- Photocopying took an average of 75 seconds
- Photocopying + Black light took an average of 112 seconds
- VeroVision Mail Screener took an average of 50 seconds

³ Johanna B. Folk, et al. 'Behind bars but connected to family: Evidence for the benefits of family contact during incarceration.' (2019) 33(4) Journal of family psychology : JFP : journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43), 453, 1-23.

⁴ Visher CA, Bakken NW, & Gunter WD (2013). Fatherhood, community reintegration, and successful outcomes. Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 52, 451–469. doi: 10.1080/10509674.2013.829899

⁵ Johanna B. Folk, et al. (n 1) 1-23.

There is thus a significant time saving of 33% using the VeroVision Mail Screener compared to current photocopying processes. This would also reduce staff workload and enable staff to be redeployed to other duties.

Watchlists enable closer mail monitoring and efficiency

The VeroVision Mail Screener can be used to streamline the mail screening process further through the creation of watchlists that enable Correctional Centre staff to monitor high risk prisoners and contacts.

Watchlists can be created to flag mail directed to specific prisoners, for example those convicted of drug-related offences. If contraband is identified in mail, the sender and prisoner can also be added to a watchlist so that their mail can receive extra scrutiny. This can enable more efficient delivery of mail to low-risk prisoners and senders who do not have a history of contraband inclusion or drug use.

Ongoing updates to new recipes and material signatures as they emerge

The VeroVision Mail Screener technology is frequently updated to keep track of the most recent combinations of substances and cutting agents to enable detection and tracking of efforts to introduce contraband into correctional facilities. These are substances that cannot be seen visually and would otherwise go undetected. Substances able to be detected include, but are not limited to the following drugs;

- Cocaine
- Fentanyl
- Heroin
- Ketamine
- Methadone
- Methamphetamine
- PCP
- Suboxone
- Soaked/sprayed methamphetamine
- Soaked/sprayed synthetic cannabinoids
- Xylazine

And cutting agents;

- Acetaminophen
- Aspirin
- Caffeine
- Corn Starch
- DXM
- DMSO
- Lidocaine

- Piracetam
- Procaine

Detecting illicit substances allows disruption of organised crime

The VeroVision Mail Screener can be a significant tool for Corrections and law enforcement agencies to detect and monitor the flow of illicit substances into prison settings. This can not only improve targeted intervention programs for prisoners but also identify those involved in criminal activity both inside and outside the prison-setting. This can be useful for prison management by identifying sources of illicit substances, those who are introducing them into prisons and which prisoners are receiving drugs and distributing them to other prisoners.

A US County Jail in NJ estimates that they interdicted \$750,000 worth of drugs in the first 11 months of using this technology.

Improved outcomes for prisoners with drugs addictions

It is well known that drug use in the prison population is high with two thirds of prisoners having used illicit drugs in the 12 months before prison entry.⁶ The information provided by the VeroVision Mail Screener can be of use to prison management in terms of the targeting of treatment for prisoners with a substance abuse issue. Medically and from a risk management perspective the information can be used to track which substances are being sought after by prisoners for targeted interventions, rehabilitation and treatment.

Cost

This technology can currently be secured for an approximate cost of \$150,000US, inclusive of hardware and the necessary specialised detection and identification algorithms.

The technology is also available as a “service” to enable an affordable option for implementation and adoption of the technology. This involves an initial down payment followed by smaller monthly payments over a 2-3 year period.

Ease of use

The screener technology is easy to use with completion of a 2-hour training module enabling staff to correctly and effectively use the device to screen mail. Follow-up support is available to resolve any questions or issues that may arise.

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘The health of Australia’s prisoners 2015’, (Report, 15 November 2015) <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/prisoners/health-of-australias-prisoners-2015/contents/illicit-drug-use>>.

Conflict of Interest

Justice Action declares that they have no affiliation with VeroVision Mail Screener or Eclipse Screening Technologies and no conflict of interests related to this publication.