How Can Public Libraries Reach Incarcerated Populations?

Prisons are a touchy topic, but in the day and age when public libraries must justify their funding, they can longer afford to ignore this underserved population of prisoners. For instance, in Fresno County, there is currently no collaboration between the Fresno County Jail and the Fresno County Public Library.

Public libraries have transformed themselves into community centers and are key resource to acquire new skills and apply for jobs. Some prisoners are incarcerated for life terms, but most are not. Generally speaking, prisons are full. The incarceration of new inmate necessitates early release on parole of another prisoner. Generally, these newly released prisoners have a hard time supporting themselves. There are no easy answers to assimilating prisoners into the normal population, but public libraries are good a starting point for former inmates looking for work. It seems that it wouldn’t hurt to give such inmates a head start on the process.

The focus of many collaborative outreach projects between public libraries and correctional officers is to grant limited and controlled access to the library’s printed materials. Books-to-prisoner groups often have a hard time securing greater access for imprisoned populations, but that is understandable considering that books and other printed materials for the purposes of enrichment must not compromise the security of the correctional facility.

Below is the Fresno County Jail’s Policy on books, magazines, newspapers and library services.

Books, Magazines, Newspapers

Magazines, newspapers and paperback books are accepted if mailed directly from a publisher, book club or bookstore. Packages containing anything other than books are prohibited (e.g., maps, calendars, etc.). Be sure to provide the inmate’s Booking and JID numbers to the publisher/bookstore. Hardbound books will NOT be accepted, unless the book is unavailable in softbound edition. If the inmate wishes to receive the book, the hardbound cover will be removed; if not, the book will be returned. If a publication contains an article considered to be objectionable and/or a threat to facility security, the publication will not be delivered and will either be returned to the publisher or placed into the inmate’s property.

Library Service

A variety of materials including religious, educational and recreational reading materials are made available to all inmates. Inmates may also have books, newspapers, and periodicals sent to them per the guidelines regarding mail. In particular, banned books have proven to be particularly troublesome. Jails zealously guard the lists to prevent political fallout.

Printed materials must be screened for contraband that may be hidden within a printed volume. In addition, the content of the material must be appropriate given the circumstances. In particular, banned book lists have been particularly troublesome in the goal of providing printed enrichment materials to imprisoned convicts. These lists are expansive and are often kept in secret to reduce the opportunity for public criticism. But occasionally, the contents of a banned book list is liked the public like by the *Dallas Morning* News in November 2017. This list of 10,000 titles included *The Color Purple*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and *Freakonomics* (Inklebuarger, 2018). To often are the efforts of books-to-prisoner groups wasted as they unknowingly run afoul of a banned book list.

In many cases public libraries and corrections facilities report to the same government entity. In Fresno County, the Fresno County Jail Division, is operated by the Fresno County Sherriff’s Office which ultimately reports the Fresno County's Board of Supervisors. The Fresno County Public Library is its own distinct department of the government and also reports to the Fresno County Public Library. In such cases, a program would only succeed if the heads of each department were to agree to explore collaboration. In the case of County of Fresno, it would be elected Sherriff, currently Margaret Mims and County Librarian--appointed by the Board of Supervisors--currently Kelley Landano. Other key figures would include the head of the correctional facilities and prison librarian. Without the support of any of these figures such a program, would be doomed to failure.

Another consideration is funding. In any significant collaboration between library and corrections personnel resources would have to be dedicated first to set up the collaboration and then a smaller amount of personnel hours would have to be budgeted to continue operating the library's collaboration with the jail.

The emphasis is on most materials is providing printed materials to the library, but online resources that already paid for through Fresno County Public Library could also be useful, but as always access resource for enrichment must not compromise the security. It would considerable scrutiny to whether a particular resource would allow inmates to contraband information. A possible solution is the creation of a web portal which limits access to thoroughly vetted resources. In particular, Fresno County Public library, providing access, paid Pronunciator, a language learning platform seems to be free from contraband information, and could provide inmates with a skill that may help move into a productive lifestyle at the end of their incarceration.

There are no easy answers on how best to treat newly released inmates, but I think that all stakeholders can agree that we should do everything reason to keep such persons from returning to a life of crime. The library can serve as a stepping stone for incarcerated persons to build a new financially stable life after having served their time.

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