

TELEPHONE BOOK
Wednesday
December 5, 2012

Prisons are filled with people who found themselves unable to obey the rules in a free society. For some, they learn their lesson, and during their incarceration, they do their best to follow the rules. Most of them, anyway. For others, however, they go out of their way to figure out how get around the rules, especially when it comes to smuggling in things like drugs, cigarettes and other forms of contraband. It's for this reason that the prison system has implemented such wide sweeping restrictions on what an inmate can and can't have, as well as where they can or can't purchase them from, how they're to be mailed in, etc.

One set of rules pertains to newspaper, magazines and books. These items used to be able to be mailed in directly to the inmate from his friends or family members, but because of a few people trying to use them to smuggle contraband in, any such items must now be sent in directly to the inmate from the publisher, or company that does mail order business. At first, this doesn't seem like such a harsh restriction, and indeed, more often than not, it doesn't pose any sort of problem whatsoever. However, as with anything in life, there's always an exception to the rule, which anyone with even the smallest amount of common sense would understand and react accordingly. However, common sense is the one thing that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has never been accused of possessing.

As everyone knows, when your phone service is initially turned on, your phone company sends you a paperback copy of the yellow and white pages for the county you live in. From that point on, every year, you'll receive an up-to-date copy of the phone book, again, free-of-charge. I know this because a company gave me a temporary job passing these out one year, and everyone on the block was given one, subscriber or not.

The prison tends to frown on inmates trying to have a residential phone line installed in their cells. In fact, they don't even like it when inmates get their hands on mobile phones, even if they're the ones smuggling them in. (Kind of gives new meaning to the term "cell phone," doesn't it??) Anyway, as such, I'm unable to obtain a free copy of a phone book, sent to me in the mail by the phone company or delivered in person by their representative. If I was originally from the State of California, instead of the State of Ohio, this might not pose a problem, as the prison library has a phone book from each and every county in California. Unfortunately, this is not the case here, and it's posed nothing but problems for me since my arrest, back in 2003.

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Like most people, even though I had a paperback version of a phone book at home, and access to the Internet, I kept all of my important contacts stored in digital format, either on my cell phone or on my home computer, usually both. When I was arrested in Ohio by the US Marshals, these items were not taken into custody with me, and I was extradited to face charges in California without access to any of the contacts who could've established my innocence. I was eventually convicted and sent to prison, where I've been for more than 9 years now.

At first, this proved to be more of an inconvenience than anything else, but as time went on, this began to pose quite the dilemma. I wasn't able to establish contact with any family or friends who'd moved during my pretrial detention, and I was unable to find out the whereabouts of a daughter I'd recently found out about. I persevered, using the limited resources at my disposal, and just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, I located my daughter.

Like most states, in California, if the state steps in to take custody of a child because of problems at home, both parents are notified, even if one of them has never even seen his child. When I was notified, I immediately put the pedal to the metal, trying to find a relative able and willing to take her into their home, but without an up-to-date phone book, this task proved to be completely beyond my power to control.

Frustrated, I turned to someone I'd recently met through the mail, someone I've become close friends with, asking for his assistance. At first, it seemed like a no-brainer. After all, phone books are often provided, free-of-charge, upon request, so we just assumed that it would be a simple matter of making a phone call and getting one mailed into me here at the prison. However, inquiries revealed that the local phone company in **Summit County, Ohio** would not send phone books out to non-subscribers, so we tried to come up with some alternative solutions. Since the phone book was needed for a legitimate reason, and for a legal proceeding, we both figured that perhaps he could mail me a copy of his personal phone book, but when he did so, I was informed by the prison that, legal proceeding or not, anything mailed into me would have to originate from the company itself or the publisher. Amazon Books, Ma Bell, even the local Barnes & Noble could send in a book, hardcover or paperback, but he couldn't mail it in himself. I begged and pleaded with the prison, to no avail, so I suggested an alternative. Instead of giving me the phone book, just let me donate it to the library, after they searched it thoroughly of course, but again, this (reasonable) request was denied and they threw it away.

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Depressed, but not willing to give up, I wrote and informed him about what happened. I also wrote to a number of advocacy organizations, informing of the situation and asking for some suggestions. One of them, and my friend, both suggested a place called User Friendly Phone Book, but my initial letter to them was returned to sender. When I got the updated address, it was never answered, so my friend gave them a call. At first, he was informed that there would be no problem, and that it would be mailed out soon, but as the weeks passed and nothing showed up in the mail, he checked my e-mail address for me (shawnlperrot@hotmail.com), where he learned that there was a \$75 "administrative fee" that first needed to be paid. Now, I don't know about you, but neither of us could afford to pay this fee, and I certainly wouldn't ask someone to pay such a hefty fee for a paperback book that's going to be out-of-date in just a few months anyway.

So here I am, in the process of preparing for yet another court hearing, and I still haven't managed to get my hands on a phone book, yellow and white pages, from **Summit County, Ohio**. If my daughter's mother hasn't managed to get her life in order, there's a very real possibility that my daughter is going to be made a permanent ward of the court, and thereby raised by the state or worse, put up for adoption. And all because I can't get my hands on a phone book. I realize that the prison has rules for a reason, but shouldn't there be some wiggle-room for emergency circumstances?

With access to a phone book, I could have looked up information like the address for the local clerk of the courts, and sent them a letter to find out who'd gotten married or divorced, who'd bought property and where, who had a traffic, civil or criminal offense and what their address was. I could have looked them up in the phone book and began networking in an attempt to find my family, where I could have then asked for help with my daughter. Instead, my daughter continues to suffer for the mistakes of her parents. What hurts most of all though is that she's suffering for the mistakes of a father she's never even met.

If anyone has an idea of how I might get my hands of a phone book containing both the white and yellow pages from **Summit County, Ohio**, please share this information with me. There's got to be something someone can do.

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