

Prisoners Denied Right to Receive Books

Throughout the country there are prison book programs - bookstores and volunteer groups who mail books to prisoners at no cost to the prisoner or the prison. Most prisoners cannot afford to buy literature and many prisoners' families live in poverty. So these book programs are vital programs that provide books to people who otherwise may not be able to receive books. I benefited from these programs for close to 15 years.

Our Courts have repeatedly recognized that prisoners have a First Amendment right to receive books in the mail, and publishers or distributors have a First Amendment right to send literature and books to prisoners.

In early 2017 some Mississippi prisons began rejecting these "free" books. Prisoners were notified in writing that "free books are not allowed" and that "books must be paid for." Prison officials' reasons for effectively banning free books remain unclear so far.

What I do know is that boredom and idleness are dangerous things in prison; I'd rather see prisoners receiving and reading books than looking for something else to do out of boredom. When a person reads, he or she learns. His or her time is occupied with a productive and beneficial activity. Reading is a tremendous contributor to education and rehabilitation.

Why ANY prison administrator would want to obstruct access to books is beyond reason.

Mississippi's DOC claims to "maintain the confinement of offenders within a safe, secure, humane and cost effective environment, while providing meaningful self-improvement opportunities to assist them in becoming productive law abiding citizens upon their release" and that they provide "efficient and effective offender custody, care, control and treatment consistent with sound correctional principles and constitutional practices."

Apparently none of this involves allowing prisoners who may be too poor to buy books access to programs that freely give the best self-improvement tool available: books. Only in a prison context would violating the First Amendment rights of others pass as "sound constitutional practices".