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MCJ Lawsuit Seeks to Provide Free Books to Prisoners

JACKSON, Miss., April 26, 2018 — Today a lawsuit was filed in federal court by the Mississippi Center for Justice (MCJ) and the law firm of DLA Piper on behalf of Big House Books and two prisoners at the South Mississippi Correctional Institute (SMCI) to allow the prisoners to receive free books directly in the mail.

According to the lawsuit, prisoners in Mississippi have always been allowed to receive a limited number of books each month directly in the mail. Last year, however, the practice changed at SMCI so that the only free books prisoners can receive directly are religious books. All other books have to be purchased. The lawsuit claims that this practice violates the First Amendment of the United States Constitution by discriminating on the basis of religious content and by limiting prisoners' access to books without any justification.

"Religious books certainly are important inside a prison," said Beth Orlansky, MCJ advocacy director. "But so are secular books. With this lawsuit, we seek simply to restore the prior

practice at the prison so that prisoners can receive books in the mail whether paid or free, whether religious or secular.”

Big House Books is a non-profit literacy program working to ensure that inmates have access to free books, including novels, history books, puzzle books, religious books, GED manuals, and educational resources. Inmates write to them and request specific books or specific types of books. Most of the books have been donated to the organization so that it can send the books to the inmates free of charge. For several years now, the organization has been allowed by the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) to mail the books directly to the inmates. That is still the case at most of the state’s prisons, but not at SMCI since this new practice was instituted last year.

“Books are a good thing, and free books are particularly good,” said Jackson attorney Rob McDuff, who is joining with MCJ in the case as part of MCJ’s George Riley Impact Litigation Project. “Many of the prisoners and their families cannot afford to spend money on books. Big House Books performs an important service by sending free books to them in the mail. Hopefully MDOC will allow BHB to resume its mission at SMCI.”

The two inmates who joined BHB in the lawsuit are Charles Owens and Jess Green, both of whom contend that they have been blocked from receiving free books because of the new policy. The defendants in the case are MDOC,

Commissioner of Corrections Pelicia Hall, SMCI, and SMCI Superintendent Jacquelyn Banks.

MCJ, Orlansky, and McDuff of Jackson are joined in the case by attorneys David Sager, Britney Prince, and Talia Tanielian of DLA Piper. Read the full complaint [here](#).

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About Mississippi Center for Justice

The Mississippi Center for Justice is a nonprofit, public interest law firm committed to advancing racial and economic justice. Supported and staffed by attorneys, community leaders and volunteers, the Center develops and pursues strategies to combat discrimination and poverty statewide.

About DLA Piper (www.dlapiper.com)

DLA Piper is a global law firm with lawyers located in more than 40 countries throughout the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific, positioning them to help clients with their legal needs around the world.