

Date: 5/27/2020 12:11:31 PM

Subject: Blog

HARLAN RICHARDS

May 26, 2020

New Opportunities For Obtaining Hygiene Items

Can you believe it? Prisoners are now able to get brand name hygiene items in Wisconsin prisons. This should be a great day for us and a feather in the cap of DAI Director Makda Fessahaye. But it's not. As usual, the devil is in the details and those details reveal a policy which looks good and sounds good - but it's not.

Since the DOC created its restitution collection policy a few years ago, it has resulted in some prisoners having 50 to 95% of their incoming money confiscated to pay restitution, court costs and/or child support. Prisoners and activists have complained that the prisoners are left with nothing and can't obtain basic hygiene items such as deodorant and shampoo.

A new procedure now allows prisoners to receive one hygiene order per quarter from Union Supply which can only be purchased for them by a free world person. The order must be between \$20 and \$50. A special catalog has been provided to us so we can tell our families what to buy us. So far, so good. These are all top of the line name brand items.

However, along with the top of the line name brand comes top of the line prices. It appears to me that the DOC and Union Supply are using an issue the DOC created (lack of access to hygiene items by some prisoners) as an opportunity to gouge prisoners' families. Making available items that prisoners can't purchase on their own from canteen guarantees that more than just the prisoners without any money will be asking their families to buy them products. The DOC is well aware that there is a segment of the prison population that has virtually unlimited access to money. For some prisoners it's a pension, Native American per capita payments, 401k accounts or pre-prison savings. But for the bulk of well-to-do prisoners it is their family which is funding their lavish (by prison standards) lifestyle.

As an aside, the DOC recently increased the amount of money prisoners can spend at canteen from \$84 to \$100 every 2 weeks. This is a sick joke to most of the prisoners trying to live on their prison wages but perhaps 10 to 20% of the prisoners can afford to spend that much (see my May 2019 blog on prison wages). The rest of us go from paycheck to paycheck pinching pennies to get by.

I asked a free world person to go to Wal-Mart and price some of the items listed. Below are 9 items showing the product, the DOC price and the Wal-Mart price. As you can see, every item is substantially higher. The only exception is the toothbrush (who uses \$4.00 toothbrushes?).

Arm and Hammer Advanced Whitening Toothpaste (7.01 oz.) \$8.50 versus \$2.98

Crest Cavity Protection Toothpaste (4.2 oz.) \$3.95 versus \$1.84

Crest Advanced Pro Health Deep Alcohol Free Mouthwash (16.9 oz.) \$10.95 versus \$8.97

Oral B Indicator 40 Soft Toothbrush \$3.95 versus \$3.97

Jergen's Ultra Healing Lotion (12 oz.) \$7.80 versus \$3.34

Old Spice Pure Sport 2N1 shampoo & conditioner (15.2 oz.) \$9.95 versus \$6.97

Afta Original Scent Aftershave (3.92 oz.) \$4.50 versus \$2.12

Right Guard Extreme Ocean Rush Gel Deodorant (4 oz.) \$8.45 versus \$3.88

Old Spice Classic Original Deodorant (3.65 oz.) \$7.90 versus \$4.97

I'll let the prices speak for themselves. Many families of prisoners are poor and have trouble making ends meet, especially those with young children. Now there's the added burden of paying inflated prices for hygiene items - something that ought to be a right for all prisoners.

Like I said, a great idea twisted into an opportunity to bleed more money out of our families. Why not make Wal-Mart or some other low-cost retailer the place to buy items for us? Because Union Supply has the exclusive contract for all canteen items. Until a few years ago, each prison ran its own canteen, purchased from multiple wholesalers and provided us with a large selection of good quality products at low prices. DOC officials in Madison forced all the prisons to shut down their canteen operations and order all canteen from Keefe (which was substantially inferior to what we had before but wonderful compared to what we have now). The end result: the DOC gets great kickbacks from Union Supply and our families get extorted into buying overpriced items for their loved one being held in prison. In my opinion, it's shameful.

One final point: the canteen items we are allowed to purchase are for the most part low-quality and are only purchased by us because it's all we are allowed to have. Union Supply has hundreds (perhaps thousands) of allowable items which we are not allowed to have, not for any security-based reason. DOC officials do not want us to have anything but the bare minimum of necessities so that we are prevented from living in comfort.

One aspect of this latest program that really irks me is that when they updated the canteen list on February 7, 2020, they removed the only good deodorant - Mennen Sport Gel, 3 oz. for \$2.80 - and told us a comparable replacement would be available on the updated price list (it wasn't). Now we have several options: go without deodorant, buy the cheap stuff still available

on canteen (which is such low quality that there's no point in using it), or ask our families to buy the overpriced name brand deodorant offered to them by Union Supply. None of these options appeal to me but I will have to determine which choice is least objectionable and go with it.