



January 3, 2018

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Acting Commissioner Anthony J. Annucci
New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision
1220 Washington Ave
Albany, NY 12226

Governor Cuomo, Acting Commissioner Annucci:

NYC Books Through Bars is a volunteer collective that has been sending free books to people in prisons across the United States for more than twenty-one years. We write to register our strong objection to Directive 4911A, whose punitive provisions would further isolate people in prisons from their families, their communities, and the world at large.

Directive 4911A limits the packages people in New York prisons can receive to items purchased from five approved vendors. One of the consequences of the directive is that groups like ours are no longer able to send free reading materials to those incarcerated in the affected facilities (currently Taconic, Greene, and Green Haven). Consider the irony: our collective prioritizes sending books to people in New York prisons. If this directive is rolled out statewide, we will be able to send books to prisoners in nearly every state EXCEPT New York.

NYC Books Through Bars receives hundreds of letters every week from incarcerated people requesting books. These requests run the gamut from dictionaries to novels to cultural histories to medical texts. Many requests come from people in isolated housing units who do not have access to prison libraries. We have even received requests from prison employees struggling to stock libraries for the general population.

Perhaps the most common inclusion in the letters we receive is gratitude: too many people to count have described how reading has helped them to learn, grow, or at least endure their

incarceration. We send books at no cost, but we believe deeply in their value.

Directive 4911A limits incarcerated people to a few dozen books and magazines, purchased at a premium from a handful of favored businesses. The approved vendors' catalogs are currently limited to the following books: five romance novels, fourteen bibles and other religious texts, twenty-four drawing or coloring books, twenty-one puzzle books, eleven guitar, chess, and how-to books, one dictionary, and one thesaurus. No books that help people learn to overcome addictions or learn how to improve as parents. No Jane Austen, Ernest Hemingway, Maya Angelou, or other literature that helps people connect with what it means to be human. No texts that help provide skills essential to finding and maintaining work after release from prison. No books about health, about history, about almost anything inside or outside the prison walls. This draconian restriction closes off so much of the world to thousands of people.

Let's not forget that statistics show a clear link between education in prison and lowered rates of recidivism. Recidivism rates are inversely proportional to level of education. Why, then, limit the tools so vital to education?

Directive 4911A hurts people far beyond the scope of NYC Books Through Bars' mission. It hurts New Yorkers in myriad other ways, inside and outside of prison: prisoners are deprived of fresh produce, visitors are no longer able to bring gifts, and small businesses are dismissed in favor of exploitative prison industry businesses. Relying on these vendors is another financial burden placed on prisoners, their friends, their loved ones, and their communities.

Directive 4911A is being framed as a pilot. We cannot let it continue to hurt the thousands who are already being subjected to it, and its injustice must not be allowed to expand to all New York state prisons.

Thank you for your consideration,

NYC Books Through Bars
% Bluestockings Bookstore
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