



January 10, 2018

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

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

Acting Commissioner Annucci, Governor Cuomo:

Letter in response to the following statement by the NYS DOCCS, dated January 9, 2018:

Inmates [in New York State] are allowed to order books and literature for personal use through the new secure vendor program. Individuals incarcerated in DOCCS facilities also have access to the general library in their facility, and if desired, can take advantage of a statewide inter-library loan program that allows inmates to request books from the public library system within the geographic area of the state closest to their current facility. The inter-library loan program is funded by the New York State Library, and utilizes taxpayer dollars to offer incarcerated individuals a wide range of books to borrow. Moreover, books and literature may be donated to facilities by charities, such as Books Through Bars. However, these items are not given to specific individuals in DOCCS custody. Instead, they are made available for use by the general population in facility libraries.

NYC Books Through Bars is a volunteer-run collective that has been sending free books to people in prisons across the United States for 21 years. We unequivocally object to Directive 4911A from NYS DOCCS, whose draconian and exploitative provisions further isolate incarcerated people from their families, their communities, and the world at large.

Every year, we receive thousands of letters directly from individuals in prison. Our volunteers respond to every request, doing their best to send reading materials to meet individual

needs. These requests run the gamut from dictionaries to novels, cultural histories, and medical texts. Many requests come from people in solitary confinement without access to prison libraries. We consider education and literacy a core objective of our mission. All of the books in our stock library are donated from the community. While we cannot always find exact titles on our shelves, usually we can come very close in meeting prisoners' needs. Too many people to count have described how the books they received helped them to learn a useful trade, grow as a person, or at the very least mentally endure incarceration.

Directive 4911A limits what people in New York prisons can receive to items purchased from a list of approved vendors. One of the directive's consequences is that groups like ours are no longer able to serve the affected facilities (currently Taconic, Greene, and Green Haven). If and when this directive is rolled out statewide, we will no longer be able to serve *any* New York state facility. As our collective has always prioritized serving New Yorkers, we cannot help but observe the irony that we will be able to send books to people in nearly every state *except* New York.

DOCCS maintains that incarcerated individuals still have adequate access to reading materials because they can purchase books from one of its approved vendors, access books through prison libraries, or borrow books through a regional inter-library system. It also maintains that NYC Books Through Bars can donate books to its prison libraries. For many reasons, these options will not meet the reading and educational needs of the 52,000 people incarcerated in New York state.

First, the largely indigent prison population does not have the funds to purchase books, and this program places undue economic burden on prisoners and their communities. The individuals who write to us express gratitude for the books they cannot themselves buy. Sometimes we receive envelopes with six or seven requests bundled together because individuals cannot even afford postage. People in prison often read a book a week, which is not viable if they do not have access to programs like ours that provide free books. In addition, the approved vendors are inadequate. They are solely interested in profits. While their catalogues contain an array of best-sellers, they currently lack any works by or about significant black historical figures such as Paul Robeson, June Jordan, or Audre Lorde. Their selection on political education is severely limited, and there are no books by major thinkers such as Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. What is more, none of the vendors currently sell fictional works in Spanish. Groups like ours have access to a much wider array of titles, all of which we send for free.

Second, we do not believe that the DOCCS libraries and inter-library loan system adequately meet the literacy and educational needs of people inside prisons. If prisoners can access them (those in solitary confinement cannot), they find libraries that are understocked, out

of date, and replete with mass-market fiction. This option limits who can receive books, how many, and for what length of time. Additionally, library books do not meet the needs of individuals who need to mark up their copies for their self-study. They do not address the need for reference materials such as dictionaries, literacy handbooks, and law books. Furthermore, we do not believe that the inter-library loan system is a viable solution. Without a catalog of titles, readers are left to guess what might be available through their regional library system. Feedback we have received from individuals who have tried to use the inter-library loan system while incarcerated indicates the system is highly flawed and rarely delivers the desired books.

Finally, we exist to support individuals, not prisons. Our goal is not to supplant the obligations of prisons to maintain libraries and provide programming. Rather, our mission remains to fulfill the needs of individuals who cannot find the specific type of reading material they desperately seek inside the prison walls. Directive 4911A obliterates our ability to do so.

Directive 4911A has been framed as a pilot, but NYS DOCCS has expressed every intention to expand it to all facilities. If it is implemented here, New York would be setting a dangerous precedent for the deprivation of incarcerated individuals across the country.

— NYC Books Through Bars Collective