

3 R's

Reading

Reduces

Recidivism

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To: Luis Arroyo, Appropriations-Public Safety Committee Chair
From: Sarah Ross and Barbara Kessel; members
3R's Urbana (Reading Reduces Recidivism)

Re: Illinois Department of Corrections Budget Fiscal Year 2012

Dear Representative Arroyo,

Over the last decade, the state of Illinois has embarked on an experiment of depriving books and reading materials to Illinois state prisoners. With little evidence of the harms or risks, and no assessment, the experiment continues. In the meantime, citizens around the state have heard from incarcerated brothers, sisters and children about the lack of books and educational materials and thus the inability to self-educate, learn about new skills and trades in preparation for release or otherwise productively use incarcerated time. Since 2004 a small group of volunteers formed Books to Prisoners in Urbana, IL and started receiving book requests from prisoners. Operating on a shoestring budget, this organization has sent over 50,000 books to more than 7,000 prisoners in just over six years. In 2010 a group of Books to Prisoners' volunteers started 3R's (Reading Reduces Recidivism), which connects local populations to prison libraries to make donations. In the spring of 2010, 3R's volunteers called every prison librarian to ask about their needs to adequately run their library. At that time, seven of the 26 large state prisons had no librarian at all, putting IDOC at risk of violating federal law, which states prisoners must have access to law libraries. When volunteers did make contact with a librarian, they begged us for any recent books, in good condition. The books most requested from incarcerated people? Job training, construction trade books, dictionaries, business books, math books, grammar and spelling tutorials, nutrition books, self help books, art books, parenting books, drug and alcohol books and yes, plain ol' fiction books.

These requests from both prison staff (teachers, counselors) and prisoners demonstrate the need for reading materials in prison and the desires of currently incarcerated people to make something of their time. ABE, GED, drug and alcohol programs and community college classes are in desperate need of books to teach basic skills. How can a student write a paper without

books? In a Danville Prison book club (also organized and funded by volunteers) prisoners say that in prison you have to "swim against the stream to better yourself."

While cable is piped into every prison cell, the libraries stands either empty or full of deteriorating books. This is shameful and puts the reputation of Illinois Department of Correction at risk for allowing the disintegration of educational programming and other rehabilitative services to prisoners, even denying the simple access to reading materials. Prison staff and correctional officers alike say that access to programming makes the prison safer by giving prisoners something productive to work towards. Statistics show again and again that educational programs reduce recidivism, and one of the ways to manage the increasingly unwieldy DOC budget problem is to invest in recidivism reduction. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that programming in prisons pay for themselves by keeping the prison safer and reducing recidivism. Every member of this committee knows that incarceration is expensive and in many ways contributing to the state's deficits. Books, magazines, and tutorials are cheap and the access to knowledge is invaluable. Thus, 3R's urges this committee to reinvest in prison libraries. We conclude and recommend the following:

The two primary problems for state prison libraries are:

insufficient personnel / time

lack of adequate materials

PERSONNEL / TIME

The libraries, on the whole, are understaffed, both by librarians and prisoner-workers. Hiring librarians is critical to provide professional oversight; allowing more prisoner-workers would alleviate some of the strain felt by librarians in prisons who are swamped with completing menial tasks. Furthermore, professional librarians have the skills and knowledge to access state-wide library resources, thereby alleviating their own budgets by cooperating with existing state agencies. 3R's recommends that this appropriations committee allocates funding so that every state prison has a full-time professional (Masters in Library Sciences) librarian.

MATERIALS

Librarians report outdated materials that are in poor condition. Librarians even lack budgets for basic supplies such as book tape, envelopes, and index cards with which to maintain their collection. In particular, librarians have expressed a tremendous need for

informational materials, such as books related to finding jobs, health information, and self-help material. For volunteers who would like to make donations, the procedures are inconvenient, inconsistent, and confusing, and discourage donations from those who would otherwise be eager. 3R's recommends that this appropriations committee allocates not less than \$5000.00 per prison library for the purchase of updated books, magazines and supplies for prison librarians.