



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
HARRISBURG

July 8, 1988

The Honorable John M. Perzel
House of Representatives
148 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear John:

This is in response to your recent request to Governor Casey to inquire as to why the Department of Corrections places limitations on electronic typewriters which may be purchased by state prison inmates.

I have been advised by the Department of Corrections' officials that there are several reasons why there are restrictions placed on the type of acceptable typewriter.

First, by limiting the typewriter's capability, the inmate's are hampered in their attempts to mass produce betting pools, announcements, petitions, newsletters, and other publications which are not formally approved, and all of which constitute a security concern.

Second, the department is limiting the amount of electronic possessions an inmate can place in their cells so as to reduce the problems associated with such equipment; namely cell pilferage and the elimination of an inmate class system.

Third, the department has banned several types of sophisticated electronic equipment (fans and personal computers) so as to limit the potential to create an electrical blackout in our institutions. In order to prevent such occurrences, the department must "draw the line" somewhere, and electrical typewriters fall into this category.

The specifications found in the amendment to "BC-ADM 815: Commissary Privileges" serve to give inmates a choice in the selection of the battery operated typewriter. For example, regular typing paper and the common AA, C

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or D size batteries are specified because institutional commissaries only carry these widely used products. They cannot be expected to stock special paper or batteries for only a few inmates. A price of \$250 is used in order to minimize the possible loss if a cell is broken into or damaged.

Finally, manual typewriters are still permitted, and the prohibition of electronic models is not regarded as impeding rehabilitation.

I trust this response addresses the concern in Ms. Collins' letter which accompanied your inquiry.

Sincerely,



Thomas F. Lamb
Secretary for Legislative Affairs

TFL/clt

cc: Mr. Frank Gillis

Citizens' Committee for Criminal Justice
P. O. Box 11806
Philadelphia PA 19128

2 August 1988

The Honorable John M. Perzel
House of Representatives
7330 Frankford Avenue
Philadelphia PA 19136

Dear Mr. Perzel:

Thank you for your support of our contention that inmates should be permitted to purchase state-of-the-art electronic typewriters as a tool in their individual rehabilitation, and for your kind letter to the Governor's Office on our behalf.

The Department spokesman, apparently Mr. Gillis, has responded to your query with several statements as to "why inmates may not purchase these typewriters". Let us attempt to address each in turn:

First, the Department states a concern about "...betting pools, announcements, petitions, newsletters, and other publications which are not formally approved...". Betting and betting pools flourish in every Pennsylvania prison without electronic typewriters. They are easily reproduced by hand or by a manual machine. Permitting inmates to own electronic typewriters would not influence the prison's gambling activity one way or the other. As to announcements, petitions, newsletters, etc., we have tried assiduously to imagine what the Department's actual concern is regarding such things. We cannot, for the life of us, come up with any such thing that would constitute even an administrative headache, let alone a legitimate security concern.

The next concern the Department raises is that of "cell pilferage". To that problem there is a readily apparent and most simple solution available: Any purchase by an inmate of equipment beyond a certain cost could be accompanied by a signed statement to the effect that the inmate bears full responsibility for any loss. This would seem to eliminate that concern.

The Department also mentions the need for "...the elimination of an inmate class system". This might be of genuine concern if the class distinctions in question were excessive or involved conspicuously luxury items. The possession of an electronic typewriter clearly does not fall into these categories. It involves an item no more expensive

than many currently allowable (such as televisions), and it involves an item of undeniable educational and rehabilitative value, not something which most inmates would covet. As to class distinctions, it is well to remember that some are, after all, highly desirable in a prison situation. There is in all Pennsylvania prisons a drug-user class, and a non-drug-user class; there is a working class and a non-working class; there is a literate class and an illiterate class; there is a penitent and a non-penitent class; there is an educationally involved and an educationally uninvolved class. It is most desirable that the Department encourage some of such positive classes and discourage those that are destructive. We are not suggesting that inmates be allowed to buy Oriental rugs or fancy jewelry, but modern educational, legal, and rehabilitative aids. That would seem to be in everyone's interest.

The Department comments that "...the prohibition of electronic models is not regarded as impeding rehabilitation." Well, it certainly doesn't facilitate it, and it makes unnecessarily difficult both an inmate's access to the courts, and his efforts to improve his educational and job-preparation levels. Even if a good quality manual were available, which it is not, such a machine is very difficult to use in making a great many clear and error-free copies of legal pleadings when one is at the skill level of most inmates. (Court documents typically require 14 error-free pages.) Such a manual machine, (though perfectly capable of producing betting pools, announcements and the like) is simply ineffective in the production of legal briefs or in the acquisition of modern job skills. It seems to us that the Department is impeding what it ought to be facilitating.

Most telling, perhaps, among the deficiencies of the manual models currently available is their inability to afford an inmate any experience with an office machine of the kind and quality with which he may be dealing upon his release. In the Philadelphia job market alone, of the businesses that have more than a dozen employees involved in the interchange or processing of information, not one uses manual typewriters. It is difficult to imagine why the Department would not want to encourage inmate job skills which would serve not only a rehabilitative, but a very practical use upon an inmate's release. The single greatest cause of parolees' return to prison lies in their inability to find and retain genuine employment. Shouldn't the Department be aiding rather than obstructing such efforts?

The Department also expresses alarm that "...sophisticated electronic equipment" (fans!?) may be used by inmates to create an electrical blackout in the institution. As anyone with even a minimum of knowledge concerning electrical circuits can tell you, this is an utterly unjustified concern. Any building which meets even minimal National Electric Code requirements (as our prisons surely ought to do) renders such blackouts impossible. At the present time, any inmate can short-circuit his cell by jamming something as simple as a paperclip into the electrical outlet. In such an event, the circuit breaker that supplies the cell simply shuts off, and that is as far as the problem goes. We cannot imagine what greater mischief could be pursued with an electronic typewriter that draws less current than a one-hundred watt lamp.

Finally, in closing his letter to you, Mr. Lamb quotes the Department as saying that their typewriter amendment serves to give inmates "...a choice in the selection of the battery operated typewriter". This is simply not true, and frankly, it is upsetting to have the Department disseminate such information which it must know is false. One can easily verify in the marketplace (or by referring to the industry's standard: Data-Quest's Spec-Check) that there is no typewriter currently for sale anywhere which meets the specifications contained in the Department's 1984 amendment. The amendment, while appearing to allow inmates to purchase electronic typewriters, actually completely bars their purchase.

As long as inmates are required to purchase the machines themselves, to bear responsibility for their damage or repair, and to use them in their cells at prescribed times, it would seem that inmate possession of electronic typewriters would pose neither threat nor inconvenience of any kind to the institution, and would be of multiple benefits to the rehabilitation, education, and job preparation of inmates.

Thanks again for your kind interest and support of our efforts to bring reason into this rather unreasonable situation. We appreciate your help more than you can imagine.

Cordially yours,

Mary Ann Collins

cc: Mr. Thomas F. Lamb

EDWIN G. HOLL
SENATE POST OFFICE
HARRISBURG, PA 17120-0030

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REPLY TO:

Lansdale



Senate of Pennsylvania

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October 14, 1988

State Corrections Institution
Mr. Thomas Martin
P.O. Box 244 F8255
Graterford, PA 19426

Dear Mr. Martin:

This office is in receipt of the attached copy of a letter from David S. Owens, Commissioner, Department of Corrections, concerning a Department policy prohibiting inmates from purchasing state-of-the-art-electronic typewriters.

As further information is received, it will be forwarded to you.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edwin G. Holl".

EDWIN G. HOLL
Senator

EGH:cso

Enclosure