



Re: Support for Computer and Technology Access Inside Alaska Correctional Facilities
August 4, 2020

Co-Chair Rep. Fields, Co-Chair Rep. Kreiss-Tomkins, and Members of the House State Affairs
Committee

We commend Jonathan Pistonik of the Anchorage Reentry Coalition for his June 10 letter titled “Support for Computer and Technology Access Inside Alaska Correctional Facilities.” We are adding our voices to the call for the removal of legal barriers currently preventing Alaska DOC facilities from benefiting from computer and internet-based technologies and the educational experiences these technologies make possible. The reality is that by restricting individuals on the inside from connecting with the outside society in positive, community-building ways, the released individual and their families are not prepared for successful reentry.

As active volunteers in the Learning Inside Out Network, we are writing to communicate our support for the Alaska State Legislature and the House State Affairs Committee to increase access to educational technologies for prisoners in Alaska. We need to address the isolated, inefficient, and limited access to quality education created by the digital divide and made exponentially worse by necessary COVID-19 protocol.

Our 1997 bill currently in place severely restricts computer technology for prisoners by specifying computer use for “vocational” and “job training” purposes. Alaska needs a bill that will specifically allow people incarcerated the use of a computer to access a secured, internet-powered educational link and to allow access to secure, virtual visitation with educators.

LION programming in-person had provided higher education access to approved cohorts. See *Aurora Magazine*, where Sam Bishop details the connection work happening inside Fairbanks Correctional Center through the University of Alaska’s General Education Writing Course 111X: “[Writing a New Self](https://spark.adobe.com/page/Dp023AtGH5thf/) [https://spark.adobe.com/page/Dp023AtGH5thf/].”

Did you know?

- The pandemic has shut down all volunteer and paid programs in prisoner education, including GED instruction and post secondary learning opportunity. Given the public health concerns, volunteer programming at Alaska's jails and prisons is unlikely to return to pre-COVID-19 capacity until herd immunity is reached through a successful vaccine.
- Education Coordinators are essential workers. In Fairbanks, G.E.D. capacity went from outside instructors serving multiple classes of multiple students a day to an educational coordinator, not a teacher, helping one student for one hour at a time.
- For a person incarcerated, without in person classes, there is no way to learn safely with others.

While these responses to the pandemic are reasonable, we have the ability to use technology to overcome these pitfalls. Our current efforts in LION have been to address these situations, but it is impossible to secure outside funding or to even begin to develop an internet-powered educational link with the current legal barriers and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technological progress has advanced where the old security concerns of technology can be easily mitigated.

- Access can be pre-approved and limited to the scope of the educational need.
- Software can be easily installed to log typing for transcription and added security.
- Prison administrators can still be able to act with their own discretion in the level of access they so choose to give.
- Across the US various levels of computer/internet access has been granted. As of 2018 inmates from 18 different states and federal inmates have access to the internet for communication and educational purposes.

Alaska, with its diverse and distantly spread inmate population, stands to greatly benefit from increased access to computer/internet based education and communication. Now, with the near complete shutdown of educational programming and visitation in DOC facilities, what was never in doubt has become painfully urgent and is a bipartisan no-brainer.

● Contact us at (907) 750-8978

● Visit us at lion.open.uaf.edu

Sincerely,

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