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Anger over DOC decision to ban used books from Seattle nonprofit

By: Deborah Horne

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There is anger over a decision quietly made by corrections officials to ban most used books sent to inmates.

The DOC said it wants to reduce the amount of contraband coming into prisons. But the decision has hit the Seattle nonprofit, Books to Prisoners, especially hard.

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The volunteers who run Books to Prisoners said the work they do here has nothing to do with sending anything illegal to the state's prisons. And this new policy is affecting their ability to fulfill their mission.

The volunteer work Melissa Henry and others are doing in this unassuming church basement is a kind of calling.

"Everyone should have access to book," said Henry. "I like to have a shared love of books and reading. So that's what I'm thinking about usually."

Books to Prisoners has been sending new and used books to inmates across the country since the 1970s. But it wasn't until 2008 that Washington state corrections officials allowed used books to be mailed to their prisoners.

That was especially good news in the state because used books are more plentiful.

And, said Books to Prisoners board member Kris Fulsaa, a 30-year volunteer, "Most of the dictionaries we get are used. And that's our biggest request."

But last week, DOC quietly restricted its used book policy to libraries or other lending institution, saying it has seen a sharp rise in contraband getting into its facilities.

Books to Prisoners didn't learn about it until the books they were sending started coming back. And they cried foul.

"We have never in 40 years--40 plus years--we've never had a complaint about contraband in our books," said Fulsaa.

Governor Jay Inslee said the DOC decision surprised him, too.

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