



Operating Procedure

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| Effective Date July 1, 2013 | Number 010.3 |
| Amended | Operating Level Department |
| Supersedes Operating Procedure 010.3 (3/1/10) | |
| Authority COV §53.1-10 | |
| ACA Standards 4-APPFS-1C-02; 2-CO-1A-26 | |
| Office of Primary Responsibility Director's Office | |

Subject
CORRESPONDENCE MANAGEMENT AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

Incarcerated Offender Access
Yes No

FOIA Exempt Attachments Yes No
Yes #2 No

I. PURPOSE

This operating procedure provides guidance for Department of Corrections staff on providing exemplary customer service to the citizens of the Commonwealth and to others they may contact in performance of their duties.

II. COMPLIANCE

This operating procedure applies to all units operated by the Department of Corrections (DOC). Practices and procedures shall comply with applicable State and Federal laws and regulations, Board of Corrections policies and regulations, ACA standards, and DOC directives and operating procedures.

III. DEFINITIONS

Correspondence Unit - A unit established in DOC Headquarters to receive, track, and monitor responses to offender related correspondence received at the Headquarters or Regional level.

Customer - The general public and the taxpayers of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Internal Customer - Employees, volunteers, contractors of the Department of Corrections, or other agencies that regularly utilize DOC services

Organizational Unit Head - The person occupying the highest position in a DOC operating unit, such as a correctional facility, regional office, probation and parole office, Virginia Correctional Enterprises (VCE), Academy for Staff Development, Corrections Construction Unit, or other organizational groups, including separate operational units at DOC Headquarters

IV. PROCEDURE

A. Customer Service

1. The Department of Corrections (DOC) is a large state agency with thousands of external stakeholders including the citizens of the Commonwealth, victims of crime, and federal, state, and local public safety agencies. While the DOC is invisible to most of our stakeholders, our success is dependent upon effective communications and interactions with our staff and public safety partners. Employees of the DOC share a common purpose and a commitment to the highest professional standards and excellence in public service.
2. When interacting with the public, the DOC expects all employees to provide exemplary Customer Service by being courteous, sensitive, responsive, and making every effort to be helpful and provide the needed information or assistance to our customers in a timely manner.
3. Organizational unit heads are responsible for communicating the need for positive customer service to all employees on a regular basis and for setting a leadership example in providing customer service.
4. Strategies for maintaining positive customer service - Generally, the following elements should be

reflected in organizational unit strategies:

- a. An organizational unit's strategy should identify its own external and internal customers.
 - b. Organizational unit heads should be aware that customer satisfaction begins with employee satisfaction.
 - c. Each organizational unit head will actively promote and monitor telephone courtesy within the unit, to include ensuring that telephones are answered, and calls referred to or transferred to another employee for assistance in a timely manner.
 - d. Each organizational unit head will actively promote and monitor responsiveness in face to face contact with the public.
 - e. Each organizational unit head will ensure that all correspondence is answered in a timely and professional manner consistent with direction of the Correspondence Unit, if applicable.
 - f. Each organizational unit head will ensure the availability of knowledgeable and informed personnel to handle inquires during the entirety of normal business hours.
5. Strategies for Improving Customer Service
- a. DOC training programs will continue to be reviewed to assure quality training and incorporate sound public service skills.
 - b. Consistent with its Strategic Plan, the DOC will continue to promote public education, staff customer service excellence, and positive contacts with the public.

B. Correspondence

1. Acknowledgement and response including findings and, if appropriate, action taken is provided as soon as practical to all correspondence received in all DOC units. (4-APPFS-1C-02; 2-CO-1A-26)
2. All responses must be courteous, professional, accurate, honest, and comply with DOC operating procedures for confidentiality and release of information (see Operating Procedure 025.1, *Public Access to Hearings, Meetings, and Public Records*).
3. Any inquiry that requests information under the Virginia Freedom of Information Act must be handled in accordance with Operating Procedure 025.1, *Public Access to Hearings, Meetings, and Public Records*.
4. The respondent must never promise any action that is beyond their direct personal control.
5. Responses should include suggestions for any available avenues of appeal and additional resources for the citizen if they are not satisfied with the response.
6. Any sensitive information in the inquiry/complaint or response will be handled in the strictest confidence.
7. When appropriate, documentation should be maintained of the inquiry/complaint, relevant facts, and the response.

C. Citizen Inquiries and Complaints

1. Inquiries and complaints submitted by citizens shall be promptly referred to the Unit Head or other designated staff for immediate information gathering or investigation as needed. (4-APPFS-1C-02; 2-CO-1A-26) A response shall be provided for all correspondence received in any DOC Unit.
2. If the inquiry or complaint is received at a level of the DOC that does not have direct access to the necessary information or the authority to respond, it should be referred to the proper level for a response.
3. Inquiries and complaints that appear to represent valid allegations of employee violation of Standards of Conduct or law must be immediately referred to the Unit Head, DOC Special Investigations Unit (see Operating Procedure 030.4, *Special Investigations Unit*), or other appropriate authority for investigation.

4. The person receiving an inquiry or complaint by telephone should record all pertinent facts and attempt to get the name and contact information for the caller to aid in gathering of additional information and response

D. Correspondence Related to an Offender

1. Incoming correspondence related to a specific offender written by an offender or on behalf of an offender by a civilian or an attorney shall be considered offender related correspondence.
 - a. Correspondence includes telephone calls, emails, FAX's, and written documents delivered through internal mail, postal mail, or other method.
 - b. A response shall be provided for all correspondence received in any DOC Unit.
 - c. Informal Complaints and Grievances initiated by offenders and related correspondence will be managed and processed in accordance with Operating Procedure 866.1, *Offender Grievance Procedure*, and Operating Procedure 866.2, *Offender Complaints, Community Corrections*.
 - d. Appeals of disciplinary actions and related correspondence shall be managed in accordance with Operating Procedure 861.1, *Offender Discipline, Institutions*, and Operating Procedure 861.2, *Offender Discipline, Community Corrections Facilities*.
 - e. All incoming offender related correspondence referred by the Governor's Office or Secretary of Public Safety or received at DOC Headquarters shall be processed by the Headquarters Correspondence Unit.
 - f. All incoming offender related correspondence addressed to Regional Office staff shall be processed by designated regional office staff.
 - g. All incoming offender related correspondence addressed to the Unit Head of an institution, Community Corrections Facility, or P&P District shall be processed by the Unit Head or designee.
2. Screening Incoming Offender Correspondence for Safety Concerns
 - a. All offender related correspondence received shall be screened for statements that present a potential safety concern to include but shall not be limited to:
 - i. Concerns that the offender is going to kill/harm themselves
 - ii. Concerns that the offender is going to kill/harm another offender
 - iii. Concerns that the offender is in fear of being killed/harmed by another offender
 - iv. Concerns that an offender is going to kill/harm an employee, volunteer, vendor, contract employee etc.
 - v. Concerns that upon impending release an offender will kill/harm a civilian, victim, or someone in the community
 - vi. Concerns that the offender is making or has made threats toward a public official
 - b. When a safety concern has been presented within offender related correspondence addressed to Headquarters Executive Staff, the Correspondence Unit shall make notifications to the appropriate Facility Unit Head or Chief P&P Officer, their designee and any other applicable staff.
 - i. These notifications shall also include a request for immediate action.
 - ii. Notifications will be made via e-mail flagged to indicate a high priority and the letter shall be attached as a scanned document.
 - iii. Telephone contact should also be made to ensure receipt of the referral.
 - c. When a safety concern has been indicated within an offender related correspondence at the regional or unit level, those staff responsible to screen the correspondence shall ensure appropriate action is taken with regard to the safety of those individuals in danger of potential harm.
 - d. In cases where an offender has threatened to kill/harm himself/herself, immediate notifications shall be made to the appropriate Facility Unit Head or Chief P&P Officer, their designee and any

other applicable staff. Mental health staff will be responsible to screen the offender and make recommendations for treatment where appropriate.

3. Tracking and Referrals of Routine Offender Related Correspondence

- a. Routine offender related correspondence shall be considered those matters that do not require an urgent notification due to a safety concern.
- b. All offender related correspondence referred by the Governor's Office or Secretary of Public Safety or received at DOC Headquarters shall be logged and tracked by the Headquarters Correspondence Unit in the electronic Correspondence Log.
 - i. Each correspondence shall be assigned a unique log number along with the offender's name, DOC number, current facility/P&P District, the referral action requested, the name of the staff responsible to take action on the correspondence and a due date.
 - ii. Whenever possible, the Correspondence Unit will preserve an electronic copy or scan of the correspondence in the electronic Correspondence Log.
 - iii. The Correspondence Unit will refer each correspondence to the responsible staff via email with instructions for the action to be taken and the due date.
 - iv. If the recipient does not have access to the information necessary for a response, the correspondence shall be returned to the Correspondence Unit for referral to the appropriate party.
- c. All incoming offender related correspondence received directly at a Regional Office that will be responded to at the regional level shall be logged and tracked in the electronic Correspondence Log by designated regional office staff.
- d. Each Facility Unit Head and Chief P&P Officer shall establish procedure and practice regarding the tracking and referral process for all offender related correspondence received at their designated location.

4. Responding to Offender Related Correspondence

- a. Designated staff shall be responsible to review all offender related correspondence and ensure each is responded to appropriately.
- b. Responses about a specific offender should be limited to general information about the offender in order to:
 - i. Confirm their incarceration or parole supervision and location
 - ii. Provide a confined offender's mailing address for purposes of correspondence unless listed as "Administrative Location" in VACORIS.
 - (a) Any offender who has an undisclosed location code (previously referred to as 055 Administrative Verification) will have a red flag at the top of all VACORIS offender pages with the notation "Administrative Location".
 - (b) Refer the person making the inquiry to the Central Classification Unit (generally the Interstate Compact Coordinator) for information regarding the offender.
 - (c) Do not give out any location information.
 - iii. Provide information concerning an offender's visiting and correspondence privileges
 - iv. Confirm the offender's projected release date at the time of inquiry
- c. No personal or medical information shall be provided to any citizen or attorney.
 - i. Response to such inquiries shall be by an *Acknowledgement Letter* (see Attachment 1) to the inquirer and a more detailed letter to the offender providing the requested information.
 - ii. See Operating Procedure 050.1, *Offender Records Management*, for guidance on information relating to an offender's criminal history, alcohol/other drug abuse and treatment, incarceration, or supervision.
 - iii. See Operating Procedure 701.3, *Health Records*, for guidance on information relating to an offender's medical or mental health condition or treatment.
- d. All responses to offender correspondence should be written in accordance with the *Sample Response* (Attachment 2).

- e. On behalf of Headquarters Executive Staff, the Correspondence Unit Manager may respond directly to any correspondence deemed appropriate.
 - f. All offender related correspondence referred by the Correspondence Unit for response shall be responded to and signed by the person indicated in the referral (either the Executive Staff member for whom the response is being prepared or the designated responsible staff).
 - i. A designee may only sign a letter of response in the absence of the designated respondent.
 - ii. The Correspondence Unit will evaluate the urgency of each correspondence to assign the appropriate response priority
 - (a) High Priority - Immediate Response for life, health, safety issues
 - (b) Medium Priority - Response within 5 working days from the date of the referral email for time sensitive issues
 - (c) Standard Priority - Response within 10 working days from the date of the referral email
 - iii. The due date for responses to Correspondence Unit Referrals should be indicated on the referral.
 - (a) If more time is needed to respond, the designated respondent may contact the Correspondence Unit for additional time to respond.
 - (b) Granted extensions shall be documented in the Correspondence Log.
 - iv. The responsible staff will respond to the correspondence as directed by the Correspondence Unit.
 - v. The responsible staff will submit appropriate response documentation to the Correspondence Unit so that the correspondence can be closed in the electronic Correspondence Log.
 - vi. Once a response is accepted as appropriate by the Correspondence Unit, the correspondence shall be recorded as closed in the electronic Correspondence Log.
 - g. All offender related correspondence to be responded to by a Regional Office:
 - i. An electronic copy or scan of the response or a summary of information provided by telephone shall be submitted to the designated Regional Office staff with the Correspondence Log number, offender's name and DOC number, date of the response, and identity of the respondent.
 - ii. Responses to correspondence are due based on urgency evaluation and priority assignment as listed above.
 - (a) If more time is needed to respond, the designated respondent may contact the designated Regional Office staff for additional time to respond.
 - (b) Granted extensions shall be documented in the Correspondence Log.
 - iii. Once a response is accepted as appropriate by the designated Regional Office staff, the correspondence shall be recorded as closed in the electronic Correspondence Log.
5. Quality Control
- a. The Correspondence Unit Manager shall ensure audits of the electronic Correspondence Log are performed no less than quarterly to ensure all offender related correspondence has been responded to where required.
 - b. Individual notifications will be sent to each responsible party where deficiencies exist.
 - c. Each Facility Unit Head and Chief P&P Officer shall establish procedure and practice to ensure all offender related correspondence received at their location has been responded to where required. The procedures should include language to address any deficiencies with their staff.

V. REFERENCES

Operating Procedure 025.1, *Public Access to Hearings, Meetings, and Public Records*

Operating Procedure 030.4, *Special Investigations Unit*

Operating Procedure 050.1, *Offender Records Management*

Operating Procedure 701.3, *Health Records*

Operating Procedure 861.1, *Offender Discipline, Institutions*

Operating Procedure 861.2, *Offender Discipline, Community Corrections Facilities*

Operating Procedure 866.1, *Offender Grievance Procedure*

Operating Procedure 866.2, *Offender Complaints, Community Corrections*

VI. FORM CITATIONS

None

VII. REVIEW DATE

The office of primary responsibility shall review this operating procedure annually and re-write it no later than three years from the effective date.

Signature Copy on File

5/28/13

Harold W. Clarke, Director

Date