



# Virginia Department of Corrections

## Administration and Organization

### Operating Procedure 010.3

#### *Correspondence Management and Customer Service*

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Incarcerated Offender

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### **REVIEW**

The Content Owner will review this operating procedure annually and re-write it no later than three years after the effective date.

### **COMPLIANCE**

This operating procedure applies to all units operated by the Virginia Department of Corrections. Practices and procedures must comply with applicable State and Federal laws and regulations, ACA standards, PREA standards, and DOC directives and operating procedures.

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## 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.

## PROCEDURE

### I. Customer Service

A. As a Public Safety agency, the Department of Corrections (DOC) interacts with many diverse individuals and agencies to include; the citizens of the Commonwealth, victims of crime, and federal, state, and local law enforcement and public safety agencies.

1. Our success is dependent upon effective communications and interactions with our staff and public safety partners. Employees of the DOC must 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.

B. Strategies for maintaining positive customer service

1. Organizational Unit Heads should ensure the following elements are reflected in their unit strategies:
  - a. External and internal customers are identified
  - b. That customer satisfaction begins with employee satisfaction
  - c. Telephone courtesy is actively promoted and is monitored within the unit, to include;
    - i. Ensuring that telephones are answered, and
    - ii. Calls are referred to or transferred to another employee for assistance in a timely manner.
  - d. Face to face contact with the public is actively promoted and monitored in response to the public's concerns.
  - e. All correspondence is answered in a timely and professional manner consistent with direction of the Correspondence Unit, if applicable.
  - f. The availability of knowledgeable and informed personnel to handle inquiries during the entirety of normal business hours is ensured.

C. Strategies for Improving Customer Service

1. DOC training programs will continue to be reviewed to assure quality training that incorporates sound public service skills.
2. Consistent with its Strategic Plan, the DOC will continue to promote public education, staff customer service excellence, and positive contacts with the public.

### II. Correspondence

A. Inquiries from the public and other agencies are acknowledged and responses 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)

B. Requests from federal, state, and local legislators and executives for information about operations or specific offenders should be responded to promptly by DOC staff with due regard to privacy protection statutes and confidentiality policies. (5-1A-4019; 4-4019)

C. 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 DOC Public Records*.)

- D. Any inquiry that requests information under COV §2.2-3700 et seq., *Virginia Freedom of Information Act*, must be handled in accordance with Operating Procedure 025.1, *Public Access to DOC Public Records*.
- E. The respondent must never promise any action that is beyond their direct personal control.
- F. Responses should include suggestions for any available avenues of appeal and additional resources for the citizen if they are not satisfied with the response.
- G. Any sensitive information in the inquiry/complaint or response will be handled in the strictest confidence.
- H. When appropriate, documentation should be maintained of the inquiry/complaint, relevant facts, and the response.

### III. Citizen Inquiries and Complaints

- A. Inquiries and complaints submitted by citizens must be promptly referred to the Organizational Unit Head or other designated staff for immediate information gathering or investigation as needed. (4-APPFS-1C-02; 2-CO-1A-26) A written response must be provided for all correspondence received in any DOC Unit.
- B. 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.
- C. Inquiries and complaints that appear to represent valid allegations of employee violation of *Standards of Conduct* or law must be immediately referred to the Organizational Unit Head, DOC Special Investigations Unit (See Operating Procedure 030.4, *Special Investigations Unit*.), or other appropriate authority for investigation.
- D. The person receiving an inquiry or complaint by telephone must 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.

### IV. Correspondence Related to an Offender

- A. Incoming correspondence related to a specific offender written by an offender or on behalf of an offender by a civilian or an attorney is considered offender related correspondence.
  - 1. Correspondence includes telephone calls, emails, FAX's, and written documents delivered through internal mail, postal mail, or other method.
  - 2. A written response must be provided for all correspondence received in any DOC Unit.
  - 3. 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*.
  - 4. Appeals of disciplinary actions and related correspondence must be managed in accordance with Operating Procedure 861.1, *Offender Discipline, Institutions*.
  - 5. All incoming offender related correspondence referred by the Governor's Office or Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security or received at DOC Headquarters will be processed by the Headquarters Correspondence Unit.
  - 6. All incoming offender related correspondence addressed to Regional Office staff will be processed by designated Regional Office staff.
  - 7. All incoming offender related correspondence addressed to an Organizational Unit Head will be



processed by the Organizational Unit Head or designee.

8. All incoming correspondence received at Headquarters and Regional Offices regarding offender healthcare will be forwarded to the Health Services Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Unit to track, investigate, and monitor in accordance with Operating Procedure 701.2, *Health Services Continuous Quality Improvement Program*.
  - a. Emails will be forwarded to the [DOC Health Services Complaints mailbox](#).
  - b. Letters must be scanned and submitted by email to the [DOC Health Services Complaints mailbox](#).
  - c. Phone calls will be forwarded to the Health Services Continuous Quality Improvement Unit at (804) 887-8118

#### B. Screening Incoming Offender Correspondence for Safety Concerns

1. All offender related correspondence received must be screened for statements that present a potential safety concern to include but will not be limited to:
  - a. Concerns that the offender is going to kill/harm themselves
  - b. Concerns that the offender is going to kill/harm another offender
  - c. Concerns that the offender is in fear of being killed/harmed by another offender
  - d. Concerns that an offender is going to kill/harm an employee, volunteer, vendor, contract employee etc.
  - e. Concerns that upon impending release an offender will kill/harm a civilian, victim, or someone in the community
  - f. Concerns that the offender is making or has made threats toward a public official, public buildings, or institutions
2. When a safety concern has been presented in offender related correspondence addressed to Headquarters Executive Staff, the Correspondence Unit must make notifications to the appropriate Organizational Unit Head, their designee, and any other applicable staff at the affected unit.
  - a. These notifications will also include a request for immediate action.
  - b. Notifications will be made via e-mail notated to indicate a high priority and the letter will be attached as a scanned document.
  - c. Telephone contact will also be made to ensure receipt of the referral.
3. When a safety concern has been indicated in offender related correspondence at the regional or unit level, those staff responsible to screen the correspondence will ensure appropriate action is taken to ensure the safety of the affected individuals and unit.
4. In cases where an offender has threatened to kill/harm themselves, immediate notifications must be made to the appropriate Organizational Unit Head, their designee, and any other applicable staff. Mental Health staff will be responsible to screen the offender and make recommendations for treatment where appropriate as directed by Operating Procedure 730.5, *MHS: Behavior Management*.

#### C. Tracking and Referrals of Routine Offender Related Correspondence

1. Offender correspondence that does not require an urgent notification due to a safety concern will be considered as routine offender related correspondence.
2. All offender related correspondence referred by the Governor's Office or the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security or received at DOC Headquarters will be logged and tracked in the electronic *Correspondence Log* by the Headquarters Correspondence Unit or by the CQI Unit for correspondence related to offender healthcare.
  - a. Each correspondence will 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.
  - b. Whenever possible, the Correspondence Unit and CQI Unit will preserve an electronic copy or



scan of the correspondence in the electronic *Correspondence Log*.

- c. The Correspondence Unit and CQI Unit will refer each correspondence to the responsible staff via email with instructions for the action to be taken and the due date.
  - d. If the recipient does not have access to the information necessary for a response, the correspondence will be returned to the Correspondence Unit or CQI Unit for referral to the appropriate party.
3. All incoming offender related correspondence received directly at a Regional Office that will be responded to at the regional level will be logged and tracked in the electronic *Correspondence Log* by designated Regional Office staff.
  4. Each Organizational Unit Head will ensure the proper tracking and referral for all offender related correspondence received at their location.

#### D. Responding to Offender Related Correspondence

1. Designated staff will be responsible to review all offender related correspondence and ensure each is responded to appropriately.
2. Responses about a specific offender should be limited to general information about the offender in order to:
  - a. Confirm their incarceration or parole supervision and location
  - b. Provide a confined offenders' mailing address for purposes of correspondence unless listed as "Administrative Location" in VACORIS.
    - i. 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".
    - ii. Refer the person making the inquiry to the Central Classification Unit (generally the Interstate Compact Coordinator) for information regarding the offender.
    - iii. Do not give out any location information.
  - c. Provide information concerning offender visiting and correspondence privileges, and direct the person to the DOC Public Web Site (<https://vadoc.virginia.gov/>).
  - d. Confirm the offender's projected release date at the time of inquiry
3. No detailed personal or medical information will be provided to any citizen or attorney
  - a. See Operating Procedure 050.1, *Offender Records Management*, for guidance on information relating to the release of information an offender's criminal history, alcohol/other drug abuse and treatment, incarceration, or supervision.
  - b. See Operating Procedure 701.3, *Health Records*, for guidance on the release of information on an offender's medical or mental health condition or treatment.
  - c. Response to such written inquiries will be by an *Acknowledgement Letter* (See Attachment 1.) to the inquirer and a more detailed letter to the offender providing the requested information.
  - d. When responding to telephone calls, emails, or letters from citizens or attorneys, the following steps should be followed:
    - i. Thank the citizen or attorney for their concern.
    - ii. Notify the citizen or attorney that the appropriate staff (Health Authority, Counselor, etc.) will look into the issue and then speak to the offender.
    - iii. Once the staff member clarifies the offender's concerns, the offender will then be asked to follow up with the citizen or attorney.
    - iv. Advise the citizen or attorney that the offender has access to facility services through offender requests, sick call, and the complaint/grievance procedure.
    - v. Advise the citizen or attorney that has a [Consent for Release of Confidential Health and/or Mental Health Information](#) 701\_F8, that relevant excerpts from the offender's Health Record may be provided upon request in accordance with Operating Procedure 701.3, *Health Records*.





- vi. Advise the citizen or attorney that has a [Consent for Release of Information](#) 050\_F14, that relevant excerpts from the offender's Facility Record may be provided upon request in accordance with Operating Procedure 050.1, *Offender Records Management*.
  - vii. Current rates will apply for each page that is copied or printed.
  - viii. Reasonable additional charges may be assessed for any research required to locate and copy records that are archived or are maintained on microfilm or computer databases and not readily available for copying. The charge should not exceed the actual cost of labor for the additional research required to locate and copy the records. Note: Any record information on a currently active offender (except previous incarcerations under different numbers) is considered readily available and is not subject to additional charges for research.
4. All responses to an offender for correspondence initiated by a citizen or attorney should be written in accordance with Attachment 2, *Sample Response*. On behalf of Headquarters Executive Staff, the Correspondence Unit Manager may respond directly to any correspondence deemed appropriate except correspondence related to offender healthcare.
  5. All offender related correspondence referred by the Correspondence Unit for response will 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).
    - a. A designee may only sign a letter of response in the absence of the designated respondent.
    - b. The Correspondence Unit will evaluate the urgency of each correspondence to assign the appropriate response priority
      - i. High Priority - Immediate Response for life, health, safety issues
      - ii. Medium Priority - Response within five working days from the date of the referral email for time sensitive issues
      - iii. Standard Priority - Response within 30 working days from the date of the referral email
    - c. The due date for responses to Correspondence Unit Referrals should be indicated on the referral.
      - i. If more time is needed to respond, the designated respondent may contact the Correspondence Unit for additional time to respond.
      - ii. Granted extensions must be documented in the *Correspondence Log*.
    - d. The responsible staff will respond to the correspondence as directed by the Correspondence Unit.
    - e. The responsible staff will submit appropriate response documentation to the Correspondence Unit so that the correspondence can be closed in the electronic *Correspondence Log*.
    - f. Once a response is accepted as appropriate by the Correspondence Unit, the correspondence must be recorded as closed in the electronic *Correspondence Log*.
  6. All offender related correspondence to be responded to by a Regional Office:
    - a. An electronic copy or scan of the response or a summary of information provided by telephone must 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.
    - b. Responses to correspondence are due based on urgency evaluation and priority assignment as listed above.
      - i. If more time is needed to respond, the designated respondent may contact the designated Regional Office staff for additional time to respond.
      - ii. Granted extensions will be documented in the *Correspondence Log*.
    - c. Once a response is accepted as appropriate by the designated Regional Office staff, the correspondence will be recorded as closed in the electronic *Correspondence Log*.
  7. Each Organizational Unit Head will ensure response to all offender related correspondence received at their location is completed in accordance with the time lines and content guidance in the *Responding to Offender Related Correspondence* section of this operating procedure.

**V. Quality Control**

- A. The Correspondence Unit Manager will 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. Quarterly audit documentation will be retained on file in the Correspondence Unit Manager's office for review and Internal Audit purposes
- C. Individual notifications will be sent to each responsible party where deficiencies exist.

**DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED IN THIS OPERATING PROCEDURE**

**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, Agribusiness Unit, and individual headquarters unit (i.e. Human Resources, Offender Management, Internal Audit)

**REFERENCES**

COV §2.2-3700 et seq., *Virginia Freedom of Information Act*

Operating Procedure 025.1, *Public Access to DOC Public Records*

Operating Procedure 030.4, *Special Investigations Unit*

Operating Procedure 050.1, *Offender Records Management*

Operating Procedure 701.2, *Health Services Continuous Quality Improvement Program* (added 11/1/18)

Operating Procedure 701.3, *Health Records*

Operating Procedure 730.5, *MHS: Behavior Management*

Operating Procedure 861.1, *Offender Discipline, Institutions*

Operating Procedure 866.1, *Offender Grievance Procedure*

Operating Procedure 866.2, *Offender Complaints, Community Corrections*

**ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment 1, *Acknowledgement Letter*

Attachment 1, *Sample Response*

**FORM CITATIONS**

[Consent for Release of Information](#) 050\_F14

[Consent for Release of Confidential Health and/or Mental Health Information](#) 701\_F8

