

January 7, 2021

Washington Department of Corrections  
Secretary Stephen Sinclair  
7345 Linderson Way SW  
Tumwater, WA 98501-6504

**Re: Wedding rings for post-incarceration marriages and in-person wedding photos for pandemic virtual weddings**

Dear Secretary Sinclair,

We are writing to ask that you ensure consistent statewide protection of prisoners' option to choose personal (free world), non-[Union-Supply](#) wedding rings when marrying post-incarceration, and to ensure that all prisoners who marry via virtual wedding ceremonies during the COVID-19 pandemic are given a later opportunity for in-person wedding photos after the pandemic subsides. These are two opportunities for DOC to not only demonstrate its [2019–2023 Strategic Plan goals](#) and [well-publicized plans for cultural change](#) in action, but also to make a gesture of sensitivity to the suffering families have endured during the COVID-19 pandemic. For prisoners who have life without parole or lengthy sentences, the dignity of a free world wedding ring and in-person wedding photos in free world clothing may be as close to marital normalcy as they will ever get. Granting them and their spouses some semblance of normalcy makes your prisons safer places by actively supporting prisoners in pro-social family development post-incarceration. DOC might also consider reimbursing families (through the [IIBF](#)) whose marriage licenses expired during to DOC's pandemic freeze on prisoner weddings.

[DOC 590.200 Marriages and State Registered Domestic Partnership](#) currently imposes no requirement that wedding rings be purchased through Union Supply, and in the past DOC never had any sort of informal practice of requiring prisoners to do so. However, religious coordinators at some facilities (such as MCC, CBCC, and WCC) have taken to innovating their own excessively restrictive policies on this point, to the detriment of post-incarceration family building and broader DOC efforts at cultural change in partnership with organizations like Amend. We applaud those humane and enlightened religious coordinators at other facilities who have put DOC's [updated Mission and Vision](#) into action by continuing to approve free world wedding rings for post-incarceration marriages. We ask DOC to instruct all religious coordinators and living unit counselors statewide to allow prisoners and their families the sacred dignity of personal wedding rings, and to treat personal wedding rings in the spirit of [RLUIPA](#)-protected religious rites, since marriage is for many people a component of religious life.

DOC recently revised [DOC 590.100 Extended Family Visiting](#) to eliminate the discriminatory treatment of post-incarceration marriages, creating an equal standard for wait times regardless of whether marriage occurred before or after incarceration. In that same spirit, DOC should not discriminate against post-incarceration marriages regarding personal wedding rings for incarcerated spouses. DOC has never treated the personal wedding rings worn by prisoners who married *before* they entered the DOC prison system, nor the personal wedding rings that were

until recently allowed for prisoners who married post-incarceration, as a threat to security, making it all the more indefensible for any local facility to suddenly insist that only \$9.95 stainless steel Union Supply wedding bands could ensure local facility security. (Note that in recent years a similar situation emerged with calendars. For a while, local facilities were only allowing prisoners to purchase Union Supply calendars, but have now returned to allowing calendars from book vendors, since non-Union-Supply calendars posed no legitimate risk to security—alas, they only posed a threat to Union Supply’s monopoly on captive consumers.) Note also that in January 2017, then-superintendent of Monroe Correctional Complex, Mike Obenland (now a Deputy Prisons Director), approved a free world ring as a replacement for a Union Supply ring that did not fit a prisoner who was marrying post-incarceration, demonstrating that a free world ring had never been a security threat in the first place. (Email records documenting this are on file with the DOC Public Records Unit.)

During this pandemic, DOC can at the very least allow families marrying via virtual wedding to mail free world wedding rings via certified mail to religious coordinators to process. DOC already has tested this process with its December 2020 pilot of virtual weddings and found it to work wonderfully. (Email records on file with the DOC Public Records Unit.) The marrying couple that experienced this process is grateful for DOC’s support of marital normalcy, and wishes for all families in the system to have this same support and dignity. DOC can also easily support families by helping marrying couples arrange to have in-person wedding photos taken at their local prison facility post-pandemic. Families need DOC to go this extra mile to support us after what has been an extremely difficult year.

Thank you for your commitment to cultural change and evidence-based approaches to reducing recidivism through best correctional practices.

Sincerely,

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