

Nevada's Department of Corrections' Practices Exploit Struggling Families for Profit

Introduction

All across the Silver State, the Nevada Dept. of Corrections (NDOC) is dramatically inflating the costs of basic goods and services that people need to purchase from their commissary accounts — including items such as food, hygiene supplies, shoes and clothes.

While a small fraction of the money in commissary accounts comes from meager prison wages, most of the funds are deposited by their families and loved ones on the outside. This egregious price-gouging has resulted in thousands of struggling families across the state going into debt just to provide basic necessities for their incarcerated loved ones.

Key facts about the NDOC's commissary markups

The average markup for commissary items is 66%.

This number includes the markup for deodorant, tampons, shower shoes, denture adhesive, and food products, but excludes religious items. The NDOC also charges an additional “electric surcharge” for items like a radio or fan.

Mark-ups far exceed those in and outside of corrections facilities.

The average grocery store markup in the United States is between 1% and 3%. A study of commissary prices in Massachusetts, Illinois and Washington state found commissary items were priced at or slightly lower than the prevailing retail price. The Clark County Detention Center charges no more for its commissary items than a local 7-11.

NDOC gets a 20% kickback from care packages sent to incarcerated people.

NDOC requires all care packages to be purchased from a single vendor. Families aren't allowed to comparatively shop. By contrast, California allows families to choose from 8 vendors, Ohio from 3, and Arkansas and Alabama, from 2.

The NDOC has ignored the legislature and the law.

Since 2012, NDOC has been required to issue regulations with respect to commissary pricing. Over a decade later, NDOC has still failed to do so. The State Auditor has twice criticized the NDOC for failing to issue regulations.

Impact of price-gouging

Incarcerated people are forced to buy food at astronomical prices.

The meals provided by the NDOC are insufficient in both calories and nutritional value — a fact which was recently highlighted by a hunger strike held by incarcerated people at Ely state prison in response to the meager portions provided to them. As a result, incarcerated people supplement their meals with food purchased from the commissary, which can be more than double the cost of that same food on the outside. For example, a can of tuna purchased at NDOC costs \$3.27, compared to \$1.09 at Walmart.

With the exception of four items, everything must be purchased from commissary.

Incarcerated people receive only one roll of toilet paper, one hotel-size bar of soap, one razor and one travel-size tube of toothpaste per week. All other basic needs such as shower shoes, shaving cream, deodorant, and medicine like Tylenol or aspirin, must be purchased from their commissary accounts.

Nevada families — disproportionately low-income families and families of color — pay the consequences of NDOC's price gouging.

Incarcerated people earn an average of just \$15 per *month* for NDOC work, and consequently depend on their families' financial assistance for survival. With the median household income of Nevadan families being approximately \$65,000 per year, these families are often forced to forgo rent, food and other necessities in order to provide for loved ones in prison. Families also report giving up phone calls and in-person visits to be able to put money on a loved one's account.

Sources

Use the link below to view and download all source materials and supplemental documentation:
<https://tinyurl.com/nevadacommissary>

Contact

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