

## BILL CENSORS OFFENDER'S LETTERS TO MEDIA

*PATRICK HENRY ONCE SAID THAT LIBERTY IS NEVER SECURE AS LONG AS GOVERNMENT DOES BUSINESS IN SECRET.*

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(Wichita Eagle) A month after a Wichita Eagle report revealed inhumane conditions at a state-run mental hospital, the Kansas House of Representatives approved a bill that would prevent sex offenders there from being able to send uncensored mail to the news media.

The House Judiciary Committee had recommended news outlets be included in a list of entities that could get mail from patients in the sexual predator treatment program at Larned State Hospital without it being opened, read and possibly blocked by hospital officials.

On the floor of the House, Rep. Jason Watkins, R-Wichita, offered an amendment to exclude reporters from a bill to rewrite the rules for housing mentally ill sex offenders.

Watkins said he was concerned that self-proclaimed journalists could obtain sexually inappropriate sketches or writings and post them on the Internet.

Rep. Candy Ruff, D-Leavenworth, argued against Watkins' amendment.

She said the sex offenders are among the few patients at Larned with the mental acuity to report instances of abuse throughout the facility, which also houses severely disabled psychiatric patients and mentally ill juveniles.

They can see, they can walk around, they can look and they can express themselves, and they can oftentimes bear witness to some of the things going on in this institution," she said.

"Restricting access to the media is something that should be done very carefully-and not at all, frankly."

As the bill stands now, patients in the sex offender unit would be allowed to send sealed mail to their lawyers, doctors, courts, the hospital superintendent, the secretary of SRS and the Disability Rights Center.

Any other mail could be opened and blocked "if the superintendent or his designee has reason to believe that the mail could pose a threat to security at the facility or seriously interfere with the treatment, rights or safety of the patients or

others."

Watkins said he trusts the facility's superintendent not to divert complaints about conditions at the hospital.

"I would imagine that he will not allow information to go out that will be the pictures and the drawings and the written sexual fantasies of these deviants," Watkins said. "I think he would allow information about inhumane conditions to go out."

On Jan. 21, The Eagle published a story based on a report by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, which cited Larned for numerous violations of state and federal laws.

According to the KDHE survey, problems included filthy conditions, cold showers, violations of patient privacy and inattention that led to the choking death of a female patient who had a swallowing disorder.

The Eagle learned of the survey's existence through a tip from a patient in the sexual predator program.

The KDHE report had not been provided to legislators and most learned of the problems at Larned from The Eagle's reporting.

As originally filed, House Bill 2001 would have revoked virtually all the rights sexual predators now have as mental patients in state custody.

Its author, Rep. Mitch Holmes, R-St. John, represents the Larned area.

He said the bill was based on a list of ideas he got after asking Larned officials in 2005 for ways to improve the facility and make their jobs easier.

He said communications should be curtailed because some sex offenders had abused phone and mail privileges to contact their victims or to harass state officials.

The original bill was substantially amended by the Judiciary Committee, where some members were concerned that it could be used to justify mistreatment and silence whistleblowers.

The amended bill allows sexual predators to retain some of the rights they now have, including the right to refuse medication, psychosurgery or shock treatments.

The amended bill also establishes rules for restraining or isolating patients.

"We really cleaned it up a lot," said Rep. Jim Ward, D-Wichita, a member of the committee.

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