Options to End or Replace Delaware DOC's Las Vegas Inmate-Mail Processing System

Comprehensive policy, legal, operational, procurement, and implementation report

Prepared July 10, 2026

Executive Summary

Delaware currently requires ordinary non-legal mail for people incarcerated at BWCI, HRYCI, JTVCC, and SCI to be sent to a Pigeonly Corrections processing address in Las Vegas, Nevada. Pigeonly opens the mail, screens and scans it, transmits the scan to Delaware DOC for review, prints a color copy, and ships the copy back to Delaware. Originals are held for 45 days and then destroyed. Legal mail, government correspondence, official documents, publisher materials, and certain pre-approved items continue to go directly to the Delaware facility. [Sources 1–3]

Delaware's published materials state that Pigeonly should open and scan mail within 48 hours of receipt and send printed copies by Priority Mail. Earlier JTVCC materials projected receipt at the prison within one to three days after shipment. Therefore, a delay approaching one month is inconsistent with the program's published service expectations and should be treated as a measurable contract-performance and internal-processing problem. [Sources 1 –3]

Delaware does not have to choose between contraband control and timely family communication. The State can stop routing mail to Nevada while retaining a "copy-only" security model. The best replacement is a Delaware-based hybrid: incoming non-legal mail goes to a secure in-state processing center; trained state or contracted personnel inspect and scan it locally; images are made available to DOC immediately; copies are printed at each prison or delivered daily; suspicious items are quarantined; and clear time limits, tracking, audit rights, and remedies apply. A 90- to 180-day pilot should compare this model against the Nevada system using actual delivery time, cost per item, rejection rate, staff time, contraband findings, grievances, lost-mail claims, and user satisfaction.

The fastest immediate reform is not necessarily cancellation. DOC can first require end-to-end tracking and enforce a maximum delivery standard, create an emergency local-processing fallback when the vendor misses it, expand the categories sent directly to Delaware, and prohibit destruction of originals while a complaint is pending. If the vendor cannot meet the standard, Delaware can terminate, decline renewal, or rebid the service subject to the contract's terms and State procurement law.

1. What Delaware's Current System Does

1. All ordinary non-legal mail is addressed to a Las Vegas post-office box associated with Pigeonly Corrections, rather than to the Delaware prison.
2. Pigeonly opens and screens the mail, scans it in color with searchable text, and provides the electronic image to Delaware DOC through a secure dashboard for DOC review.
3. Pigeonly prints the approved mail and ships the printed copy to Delaware for distribution. The incarcerated person does not receive the original.
4. The original is held for 45 days and then destroyed; it is not returned to the sender.
5. Legal mail from attorneys, government correspondence in official envelopes, identification and other official documents, publisher-sent books and periodicals, and specified pre-approved materials are processed directly at the Delaware facility.
6. DOC's stated justification is preventing papers or envelopes treated with liquid synthetic drugs or other contraband from entering secure areas.

Key official quotation: Delaware states, "Within 48 hours of receipt Pigeonly Corrections will open and scan incoming mail," then print and prepare it for shipment by Priority Mail. [Source 1]

Key official quotation: Delaware also states that originals "are held for 45 days. After this period, it is destroyed." [Source 1]

2. Why Month-Long Delays Require Corrective Action

2.1 The delay conflicts with the State's own representation

A system advertised as a 48-hour scanning process plus Priority Mail transit should not ordinarily take a month. The delay may occur at one or more stages: USPS delivery to Las Vegas; vendor intake; scanning; DOC dashboard review; vendor printing; return shipment; prison mailroom intake; housing-unit distribution; address or SBI matching; or rejection/appeal handling. Without timestamp data at every stage, DOC cannot identify the bottleneck or hold the responsible party accountable.

2.2 Communication is a correctional and reentry interest, not a luxury

The National Institute of Justice reports that strong family support is among the biggest factors in successful reentry, and research summarized by NIJ links family contact with reduced recidivism. Letters are especially important for families unable to afford frequent calls, electronic messages, or travel. [Source 9]

2.3 Delay can cause concrete harm

- Loss of time-sensitive family, medical, educational, housing, employment, benefits, and reentry information.
- Delayed notice of deaths, illnesses, emergencies, school matters, and family decisions.
- Interference with grievance support, public-record requests, advocacy, and correspondence with organizations that may not qualify as legal mail.

- Increased anxiety, conflict, grievances, staff inquiries, duplicate mailings, and expense to families.
- Loss of irreplaceable children's drawings, cards, photographs, and handwriting because originals are destroyed.
- Accessibility harms for people with low vision, dyslexia, cognitive disabilities, limited English proficiency, or difficulty reading degraded copies.
- Privacy and data-security exposure caused by sending personal correspondence across the country to a private processor and retaining searchable digital images.

3. Main Options to Stop Sending Mail to Nevada

Option A — Restore direct delivery of original personal mail after local inspection

Send ordinary mail directly to each Delaware facility. Staff inspect it with gloves, appropriate ventilation, drug-detection tools, x-ray/visual examination, and targeted laboratory testing where justified. Approved originals are delivered.

Advantages: Best preserves family connection and original documents; no cross-country delay; simplest address.

Limitations: Potential exposure to treated paper; staffing and training requirements; may be politically difficult unless supported by a strong risk assessment.

Best use: Use only if evidence shows that controlled inspection and targeted testing manage risk adequately.

Option B — Scan and photocopy at each Delaware prison

Mail goes directly to each prison. A dedicated local mail unit opens, screens, scans, prints, and distributes copies; originals remain outside housing units and are returned or destroyed after a retention period.

Advantages: Removes Nevada transit; local accountability; same-day or next-day processing is possible; preserves copy-only security model.

Limitations: Requires equipment, space, staffing, quality control, backup capacity, and consistency among facilities.

Best use: Strong option where volume supports a facility mail unit.

Option C — Create one centralized Delaware DOC mail-processing center

All ordinary mail goes to one secure Delaware address, such as a DOC administrative or warehouse site. State employees or a contractor inspect and scan it. Images transmit instantly to each prison; printing occurs centrally or at the prisons.

Advantages: Economies of scale; uniform standards; close contract supervision; eliminates cross-country shipping; can provide daily courier delivery.

Limitations: Single point of failure unless backup capacity exists; requires secure facility and transport plan.

Best use: Best overall structural replacement for Delaware's four-prison system.

Option D — Contract with an in-state or nearby regional processor

Rebid the work with a mandatory Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, or New Jersey processing location and strict end-to-end service levels.

Advantages: Retains vendor expertise while cutting distance; competitive procurement may improve price and performance.

Limitations: Still depends on a private vendor; nearby is not the same as accountable; privacy and destruction concerns remain.

Best use: Useful transition or long-term option if state operation is not feasible.

Option E — "Scan once, print locally" digital-delivery model

A Delaware center scans approved mail and uploads it securely. Each prison prints it immediately, or the incarcerated person views it on a tablet with a free paper-copy right. No return shipment of printed bundles is required.

Advantages: Eliminates return-mail transit; fastest model; gives DOC direct timestamp control.

Limitations: Requires reliable networks, printers, cybersecurity, disability accommodations, and a no-cost paper alternative.

Best use: Highly recommended as part of Options B or C.

Option F — Hybrid risk-based mail system

Low-risk mail from verified senders or approved organizations goes directly to Delaware; unknown or higher-risk mail receives local scanning; suspicious mail is quarantined.

Advantages: Avoids treating every item as equally dangerous; reduces volume and expense; preserves more originals.

Limitations: Needs clear, viewpoint-neutral criteria and an appeal process; sender verification must not exclude poor or digitally disconnected families.

Best use: Recommended after a pilot and legal review.

Option G — Secure original-mail quarantine and delayed release

Mail is locally scanned immediately. Originals remain sealed in a secure quarantine area for a defined period, then are delivered if testing and intelligence show no concern, or returned to sender.

Advantages: Preserves originals while separating immediate communication from physical-paper risk.

Limitations: Storage and chain-of-custody burden; delayed originals; science-based quarantine period is needed.

Best use: Useful for cards, children's art, photographs, and sentimental items.

Option H — Expand direct electronic correspondence without replacing free postal mail

Allow family and approved organizations to send free or low-cost electronic letters that DOC prints locally, while maintaining a robust postal option.

Advantages: Fast, trackable, and reduces physical-mail volume.

Limitations: Digital divide, vendor fees, surveillance, and risk of making electronic service the only practical route.

Best use: Supplement only; never use as justification to degrade postal mail.

Option I — USPS or State mailroom presort partnership

Use a Delaware PO box or Business Reply arrangement, daily pickup, intelligent-mail barcodes, and state mail operations to route mail to a secure local center.

Advantages: Improves tracking and address accuracy; uses existing public infrastructure.

Limitations: USPS will not perform correctional screening itself; DOC still needs scanning and review capacity.

Best use: Helpful operational layer for Options B–D.

Option J — Return to sender after local scan instead of destroying originals

After successful scan and a short claim period, return originals to the sender in batches or allow prepaid return, rather than destroying them.

Advantages: Protects sentimental and evidentiary value; reduces destruction disputes.

Limitations: Postage and handling cost; contraband-bearing mail needs evidence procedures, not return.

Best use: Recommended for approved mail unless cost analysis shows otherwise.

4. Recommended Delaware Model

Adopt a centralized in-state "scan locally, print locally" system with risk-based exceptions and original-preservation safeguards.

- One Delaware mailing address for ordinary non-legal mail, with the correct facility and SBI number encoded in the address.

- Daily USPS pickup or delivery at a secure Delaware processing center.
- Dedicated trained mail technicians, not correctional officers pulled unpredictably from security posts.
- Controlled opening stations, personal protective equipment, ventilation, evidence lockers, and protocols for suspected drugs.
- High-resolution duplex color scanners with automatic page counts and image-quality checks.
- Immediate secure upload to DOC; local prison printing at least twice each business day.
- Same-business-day processing for mail received before a stated cutoff; next-business-day processing otherwise.
- Delivery to the incarcerated person within two business days after Delaware receipt, absent documented security review.
- Electronic timestamping at receipt, scan, DOC approval, print, prison receipt, housing-unit delivery, rejection, and appeal.
- Original retention for at least 60 days, and longer whenever a grievance, claim, investigation, court matter, or public-record request is pending.
- Return of approved originals upon request or for defined sentimental categories; no destruction without a logged certificate.
- Free accessible copies, including enlarged print, reprints, and replacement copies when image quality is poor.
- A manual continuity plan that activates during outages, staffing shortages, weather emergencies, or cybersecurity incidents.

5. Contract and Procurement Actions

The actual Pigeonly contract, amendments, pricing, service-level provisions, termination clauses, and performance records should be obtained before deciding whether Delaware may terminate immediately, must provide notice and cure, or should wait for expiration. The public sources reviewed establish the operating system but do not disclose the full current contract terms or total cost.

- Issue a written cure notice for any failure to meet required processing or delivery times.
- Require a 90-day production of timestamp data for every item, broken down by processing stage and facility.
- Impose service credits or liquidated damages if authorized by the contract.
- Require vendor-paid expedited shipping after a missed deadline.
- Prohibit subcontracting or relocation of processing without written State approval.
- Require Delaware ownership and exportability of all scans, logs, metadata, and audit data.
- Require breach notification, encryption, access logs, employee background checks, deletion verification, and limits on secondary use of correspondence data.
- Use an open competitive solicitation that scores total end-to-end delivery time, not merely scanning speed.

- Require bidders to price state-owned, vendor-operated, and fully outsourced alternatives separately.
- Include transition assistance, data migration, continuity of service, and destruction certification at contract end.

6. Minimum Service Standards for Any Replacement

Measure	Recommended standard	Required evidence
Receipt-to-scan	95% within 1 business day; 99% within 2	Automatic timestamp
Scan-to-DOC decision	95% within 4 business hours	Dashboard log
Approval-to-print	Same business day	Print-server log
Delaware receipt-to-inmate delivery	95% within 2 business days; 99% within 4	Signed unit delivery record
Urgent verified mail	Same day	Urgent-mail queue
Image quality	99.5% complete, legible, correctly ordered	Sampling audit and reprint rate
Lost or misrouted mail	Below defined threshold; individual investigation	Incident and chain-of-custody report
Rejection notice	Sender and recipient notified within 2 business days	Notice copy and reason code
Appeal decision	Within 5 business days	Independent reviewer record
System availability	At least 99.9%, with tested continuity plan	Monthly uptime and drill reports

7. Legal Framework and Safeguards

7.1 First Amendment reasonableness

Incoming prison-mail restrictions are generally evaluated under the deferential reasonableness standard associated with Turner v. Safley and Thornburgh v. Abbott. A regulation must be rationally connected to a legitimate and neutral correctional interest; courts also consider alternative means of exercising the right, the effect of accommodation on prison resources and safety, and whether obvious, easy alternatives suggest an exaggerated response. [Sources 5–6]

Security against drug-soaked paper is a legitimate interest. But a documented one-month delay, destruction of originals, poor copies, or lack of an effective complaint process may be harder to justify when faster in-state scanning and other ready alternatives can achieve the same security objective.

7.2 Rejection procedures

Procunier v. Martinez held that withholding a particular letter requires minimum safeguards against arbitrariness or error, including notice and an opportunity for review by someone

other than the original decisionmaker. Although later cases changed the substantive standard for incoming mail, procedural safeguards remain an important risk-control practice. [Source 4]

7.3 Legal and privileged mail

Legal mail should remain outside ordinary vendor processing. Wolff v. McDonnell recognized that prisons may open properly identified attorney mail for contraband inspection in the incarcerated person's presence; the Court emphasized that the person's presence helps ensure officials do not read it. [Source 7]

7.4 Access to courts and time-sensitive materials

The system should immediately route mail from courts, counsel, government agencies, and verified legal-service organizations to the direct privileged or official-mail channel. Misclassification cannot be allowed to consume filing deadlines. A clear emergency escalation and replacement-copy process is essential.

7.5 Disability and language access

Copies must be readable and complete. DOC should provide enlarged copies, high-contrast printing, screen-reader compatible electronic access where available, and assistance for people who cannot read or navigate the grievance process. The same protections should cover limited-English-proficient recipients.

7.6 Privacy, records, and evidence

Personal mail may include medical, family, financial, immigration, educational, and other sensitive information. Contracts and policy should define who may access scans, how long they are retained, whether content can be searched, when law-enforcement access requires authorization, how breaches are handled, and how deletion is verified. Mail relevant to litigation, grievances, investigations, or claims must be preserved through a legal hold.

8. Oversight and Transparency

- Publish monthly facility-level performance dashboards showing median, 90th-percentile, and maximum delivery time.
- Report the number of items received, scanned, rejected, appealed, reversed, lost, duplicated, damaged, or delivered late.
- Separate vendor processing time from DOC review time and prison distribution time.
- Create a toll-free family complaint line and web/mail complaint form with a tracking number.
- Allow incarcerated recipients to report nonreceipt, missing pages, unreadable copies, wrong-recipient delivery, or untimely mail without retaliation.
- Conduct quarterly independent sample audits comparing envelopes, scans, printed pages, and delivery logs.
- Provide the General Assembly and an independent correctional oversight body with contract, cost, incident, and performance reports.

- Require immediate notice of a backlog exceeding one business day or any loss of a mail batch.

9. Cost Analysis Delaware Should Perform

A defensible decision requires the current contract price and actual workload. Delaware should compare total cost per successfully delivered item, not just vendor invoices. Include:

- Vendor charges, postage to Nevada, return Priority Mail, supplies, and technology fees.
- DOC staff time for dashboard review, prison intake, sorting, reprinting, inquiries, and grievances.
- Family cost from duplicate mailings, paid electronic alternatives, and rejected items.
- Claims, litigation, records work, data breaches, and lost or destroyed originals.
- Capital costs for scanners, printers, ventilation, secure space, software, cybersecurity, and backup power.
- Operating costs for mail technicians, supervisors, training, testing, courier service, maintenance, paper, toner, and storage.
- Benefits from faster processing, fewer grievances, reduced staff interruptions, better reentry communication, and preservation of evidence.

The State should solicit at least three priced scenarios: (1) state-owned and state-operated; (2) state-owned and vendor-operated in Delaware; and (3) competitively contracted nearby processing with local printing. A pilot can establish actual staffing and throughput before statewide conversion.

10. Step-by-Step Implementation Plan

7. Within 15 days: order an operational review and preserve all vendor and DOC mail timestamps, complaints, incident reports, invoices, and contracts.
8. Within 30 days: publish interim delivery standards; create a missing-mail complaint process; stop destruction of originals connected to a complaint; and require expedited handling of existing backlogs.
9. Within 45 days: obtain and review the contract; issue any appropriate cure notice; measure mail volume by facility, pages, photos, and rejection category.
10. Within 60 days: establish a stakeholder working group including DOC security and mail staff, incarcerated representatives, families, disability advocates, defense counsel, prosecutors, courts, reentry organizations, procurement, IT, cybersecurity, and public health experts.
11. Within 75 days: release a request for information or cost proposals for in-state scanning and local printing; evaluate use of existing State space and staff.
12. Within 90 days: begin a controlled pilot at one facility or central Delaware site, while maintaining the existing system as backup.
13. For 90–180 days: compare delivery time, contraband results, cost, image quality, complaints, staff safety, and downtime using identical metrics.

14. After evaluation: terminate, modify, rebid, or phase out the Nevada arrangement according to contract rights and documented results.
15. Within one year: complete statewide implementation and publish an independent post-implementation audit.

11. Questions DOC and the Vendor Should Be Required to Answer

16. What is the exact median, 90th-percentile, and maximum number of days from Las Vegas receipt to inmate delivery for each Delaware prison?
17. How many pieces exceeded 2, 5, 10, 20, and 30 days during each month?
18. At which step did each delayed item wait, and who controlled that step?
19. What is the current backlog, and how old is the oldest item?
20. What are the contract's service levels, remedies, cure rights, termination rights, and renewal date?
21. What does Delaware pay per month, per piece, per page, and for postage or reprints?
22. How many contraband incidents were prevented specifically by off-site Nevada processing, compared with local-copy alternatives?
23. How many items were rejected, lost, misrouted, incompletely scanned, poorly printed, or delivered to the wrong person?
24. How many originals were destroyed while the sender or recipient disputed nonreceipt or poor reproduction?
25. Who can search or access digital mail, how long are scans kept, and are data used for any purpose beyond delivery and legitimate security review?
26. What continuity plan exists for staffing shortages, equipment failure, cyberattack, weather, or postal interruption?
27. Why is printing performed in Nevada rather than at Delaware facilities immediately after DOC approval?

12. Bottom-Line Recommendation

Delaware should move away from the Nevada print-and-return model unless the vendor can promptly demonstrate reliable end-to-end delivery and the State finds it materially safer and less costly than local alternatives. The preferred system is centralized Delaware scanning plus immediate local printing, backed by risk-based inspection, preservation of originals, no-cost accessibility accommodations, transparent performance metrics, independent review of rejections, and an enforceable two-business-day delivery goal.

This approach preserves the principal security benefit claimed for the current system—the incarcerated person receives a reproduction rather than potentially contaminated paper—while eliminating the unnecessary cross-country return shipment that creates delay, weakens accountability, and increases the risk of loss.

Sources and Selected Quotations

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Official announcement describing security rationale and statewide expansion.
https://news.delaware.gov/2024/03/26/department-of-correction-expands-enhanced-mail-screening-system-to-all-state-prison-facilities/

4. Procunier v. Martinez, 416 U.S. 396 (1974).
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5. Turner v. Safley, 482 U.S. 78 (1987).
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6. Thornburgh v. Abbott, 490 U.S. 401 (1989).
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10. Utah Department of Corrections, "Communication."
Current example of an internal system in which inbound mail is scanned, printed in color, and distributed by facility mailrooms rather than routed to Las Vegas for print-and-return.
https://corrections.utah.gov/family-and-friends/communication/

Important Qualification

This report identifies policy and legal options from publicly available sources. It does not state that Delaware may cancel the present agreement without notice or cost, because the complete current contract and amendments were not located in the public materials reviewed. Contract counsel and State procurement officials should examine those documents before termination or rebidding.