

Court Backs Right Of Indigent Inmate To Law Libraries

WASHINGTON, Nov. 8 (UPI)

—In another action strengthening the rights of indigent prisoners, the Supreme Court ruled today that California must provide such inmates with more legal help than just the current list of law books it has made available in its prisons.

In an unsigned two-paragraph opinion, the Court affirmed a ruling last year by a three-judge Federal panel in San Francisco. The Court cited this ruling in a 1969 Tennessee case, stating that a state may not, in the absence of alternatives, bar prisoners from preparing their own legal petitions.

The Federal panel had struck down a California prison regulation that established an exclusive list of "basic codes and references" for prison use. The panel had said that this material "would offer meager fare to a criminal lawyer."

Seeking to retain the regulation, California argued before the Supreme Court that law books would be a hindrance to prisoners with limited educations because they would sprinkle their petitions with "voluminous, irrelevant and confusing citations."

The Federal panel did not recommend any specific reform for the California prison system. It suggested use of public defenders or programs involving law students and professors.