

**PUBLIC HEALTH MADISON & DANE COUNTY
MEMORANDUM**

TO: Members of Public Protection & Judiciary Committee

FROM: Aurielle Smith, Director of Community Initiatives, Public Health Madison & Dane County

DATE: July 22, 2025

SUBJECT: Clarification on Fentanyl Transmission Risks in Custodial Settings Amid Consideration of Jail Communication Contract

Purpose:

This memo is being issued in response to ongoing concerns regarding the transmission of fentanyl, particularly through dermal (skin) exposure, in correctional environments. These concerns are emerging as the Dane County Board of Supervisors considers Resolution 2025 RES-056, which would authorize a contract with Smart Communications Holding, Inc. for a new jail communication technology system, including mail scanning, video visitation, and tablet services.

Context:

If approved, Resolution 2025 RES-056 would initiate a contract with Smart Communications to modernize the Dane County Jail's resident communication infrastructure. While the resolution is still pending approval, Public Health Madison & Dane County (PHMDC) has received inquiries (from Staff and County Board members) about potential safety concerns related to fentanyl exposure—particularly via incoming mail—under the proposed system.

Public Health Clarification:

PHMDC affirms the following evidence-based information regarding fentanyl exposure:

- Fentanyl is not absorbed through casual (brief, incidental or non-intensive) skin contact in a way that would result in overdose. Extensive toxicological and occupational health research confirms that touching fentanyl powder or residue does not pose a significant

risk of overdose unless there is prolonged exposure, and absorption is aided by moisture, heat, or compromised skin. Examples include: brushing fentanyl powder off your clothes or glove while wearing standard PPE, briefly touching a surface that may have fentanyl residue while your skin is dry and intact, accidentally getting fentanyl powder on your hands for a few seconds and washing it off promptly, picking up an item with fentanyl residue using gloves, or touching it briefly with bare, unbroken skin.

- The risk of aerosolized fentanyl exposure in mail or tablet handling scenarios is extremely low.(1) Routine activities such as opening envelopes, handling scanned documents, or using electronic tablets do not create the conditions necessary for dangerous airborne fentanyl exposure.
- Protective gloves and hand hygiene are effective safeguards. Standard jail protocols that include wearing gloves and washing hands after contact with unknown substances provide sufficient protection.(2)

Conclusion:

As Public Protection and Judiciary weigh the potential adoption of 2025 RES-056, Public Health Madison & Dane County underscores that casual contact, such as that which could happen via handling of mail, with fentanyl does not pose a significant health risk. We are happy to continue to provide public health perspective to other County departments and the County Board as topics arise in which our department may have expertise.

Citations:

1. Washington State Department of Health. (n.d.). *Fentanyl exposure in public places*. <https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/opioids/fentanyl-exposure-public-places>
2. Drug Enforcement Administration. (2017). *Fentanyl safety recommendations for first responders*. <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/Publications/Final%20STANDARD%20size%20of%20Fentanyl%20Safety%20Recommendations%20for%20First%20Respond....pdf>