

Vermont Psychiatric Care Hospital Policy and Procedure		
Phone and Mail Access		
Effective: July 2021	Revised: May 2024	Due to Review: May 2026

POLICY

The Vermont Psychiatric Care Hospital (VPCH) will ensure hospitalized individuals' rights to communicate with individuals or agencies will be protected when admitted to the hospital, while also promoting safety and privacy in adherence with this policy.

A hospitalized individual's right to mail or telephone communication shall not be restricted unless it is determined by the treatment team and approved by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and General Counsel that it is necessary for the medical welfare of the hospitalized individual, or needs of the hospitalized individual, or the hospital to impose restrictions.

PROCEDURE

Mail

Hospitalized individuals are entitled to communicate by receiving/sending sealed mail or otherwise with persons, including official agencies, inside or outside the hospital. If a hospitalized individual's use of the mail negatively impacts care, safety, or hospital operations, or mail involving violations of law/legal orders, the individual's treatment team shall discuss the concern with the hospitalized person and collaborate on a strategy to address their use of mail. These efforts shall be documented in the medical record.

If restrictions are determined to be necessary, the treatment team shall request mail restrictions to the CEO on a case-by-case basis and must provide clinical justification that the correspondence is detrimental to the health and safety of the person hospitalized. These must be reviewed and approved by both the CEO and the General Counsel. The Director of Quality will receive requests for mail restrictions from the treatment team of the hospitalized individual in the absence of the CEO.

If restrictions have been approved by the CEO and General Counsel, they require a physician order. Limitations on mail use must be reviewed for continuing necessity by the treatment team, with General Counsel input, on a weekly basis. Where the hospitalized individual or interested third parties request such a review, the treatment team shall initiate it the next business day.

Every hospitalized individual has a right to communicate by sealed mail with their attorney, clergyman, the judge (if any) who ordered the hospitalization, or the Commissioner of the Department of Mental Health regardless of any restriction(s) that may be in place.

Sending Mail

Outgoing mail must be properly addressed and sealed to be sent. Letters without a return address will be returned to the sending individual for correction. Letters with illegible addresses or without valid mailing addresses shall be returned to the sending individual. Correspondence found in the milieu or public areas shall be returned to the individual.

Hospitalized individuals without funds may mail up to seven letters per week at hospital expense.

Writing implements shall be available to hospitalized individuals. Observation may be required for safe use, observing personnel shall determine and provide the level of supervision required.

Receiving Mail

VPCCH personnel shall not read the hospitalized individual's correspondence or otherwise unnecessarily invade the hospitalized individual's privacy.

Direct care personnel shall examine and open all incoming mail including packages in front of the hospitalized individual to whom it is addressed, to screen it for restricted items or valuables in accordance with VPCCH restricted items and personal effects policies. This may take place with a barrier in place if warranted. The receipt of items via mail may be limited if there are safety concerns, if determined to be excessive, storage capacity is exceeded, or the treatment team identifies other clinical concerns. If limitations on the receipt of items are determined to be necessary, a nursing order shall be put in the medical record.

Telephone Use

Telephones are available on each unit for hospitalized individuals. Phone use is generally permitted between the hours of 0700 and 2200. Because the telephones are shared, calls from unit phones may be limited to ten minutes to allow other individuals access. Phone use may also require staff assistance and therefore phone use may be delayed until staff are available to afford the needed assist.

Upon admission, hospitalized individuals will be asked to sign the *Confirming Patient Status Authorization Form*. Hospitalized individuals may accept, decline, or refuse to answer whether they wish to receive phone calls.

Phone use may be supervised or limited in real time at nursing discretion, or as part of an individual's comprehensive treatment plan, when it is determined that use of a telephone will place them or the other individuals in their immediate vicinity at imminent risk for injury. Examples include limiting phone use to the wall phone versus a cordless phone, using with supervision if there is an increased risk of weaponizing the phone, etc.

If a hospitalized individual's use of the phone negatively impacts care, safety, or hospital operations, or phone correspondence involving violations of law/legal orders, the individual's treatment team shall discuss the concern with the hospitalized person and collaborate on a strategy to address their use of phones. These efforts shall be documented in the medical record.

If restrictions are determined to be necessary, the treatment team shall request phone restrictions to the CEO on a case-by-case basis and must provide clinical justification that the use is detrimental to the health and safety of the person hospitalized. These must be reviewed and approved by both the CEO and the General Counsel. The Director of Quality will receive requests for phone restrictions from the treatment team of the hospitalized individual in the absence of the CEO.

If restrictions have been approved by the CEO and General Counsel, they require a physician order. Limitations on phone use must be reviewed for continuing necessity by the treatment team, with General Counsel input, on a weekly basis. Where the hospitalized individual or interested third parties request such a review, the treatment team shall initiate it the next business day.

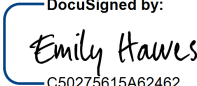
Every hospitalized individual has a right to communicate by phone with their attorneys, clergyman, Disability Rights Vermont, the Patient Representative, health care agent, or guardian regardless of any restriction(s) that may be in place.

Safety shall not be compromised in the event of an immediately escalating crisis situation in order to provide a hospitalized individual with a phone.

REFERENCES

[Confirming Patient Status Authorization Form NCF-86 2-19-16.pdf](#)

18 V.S.A. § 7705

Approved by	Signature	Date
Emily Hawes Commissioner Vermont Department of Mental Health	 DocuSigned by: <i>Emily Hawes</i> C50275615A62462...	5/15/2024