

Sheriff: No e-cigarettes for Sangamon County Jail inmates

By Tobias Wall Staff Writer

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Despite the practice gaining traction in some Illinois county jails, Sangamon County Sheriff Neil Williamson said allowing inmates to purchase and use electronic cigarettes in his jail is not something he's presently interested in.

"We batted it around here at the staff level, and we decided not to take advantage of the e-cigarettes," Williamson said.

But it's an open 'no.' Williamson said he and his staff "didn't totally rule it out."

"We know other counties are allowing their inmates to use them, and they're making a huge profit on it," Williamson said. "We just don't like the idea of bringing foreign material into the jail."

He also said he didn't want to allow the e-cigarettes because he didn't want "to contribute to a bad habit we've tried to be rid of for almost two decades." The jail has been smoke-free for about 18 years, Williamson said.

It's going down a little differently in Knox County, where Sheriff David Clague told a county board committee three weeks ago that he was ready to move forward with plans to introduce e-cigarettes to inmates at his jail in Galesburg.

A Galesburg Register-Mail [report](#) from July 17 said that Clague told the board a vendor in Pekin had come up with an e-cigarette design that couldn't be broken down and used as a deadly shiv.

Clague told the board the jail could buy the cigarettes for \$7 apiece, sell them for \$14 and put the profit generated by the sales back into an account the jail uses to buy supplies offered for sale to inmates.

The cigarettes would be numbered, and inmates would have to register in a logbook when they purchase one and return it when they're done.

Despite assurances from Newman & Ullman — the Pekin vendor set to supply the e-cigarettes to Knox County — that the cigarettes would be safe to give to inmates, Williamson still wasn't interested.

“Inmates are pretty innovative,” he said.

Tom Shaer, a spokesman for the Illinois Department of Corrections, said he was aware e-cigarettes were available in some county jails but declined to comment about the practice at that level.

But in statewide facilities, inmates won’t get to partake. Shaer said the department banned smoking in prisons in 2006.

“Simply put, IDOC is not revisiting the topic of e-cigarettes in Illinois prisons,” he said. “We long ago decided not to change our nonsmoking policy, and there are no plans to consider a change.”

Shaer also wasn’t convinced that the e-cigarettes’ design meant they couldn’t be made into weapons. He said Corrections has reduced the amount of weapons in prisons by 80 percent in the last 14 years and keeping e-cigarettes out will continue the trend

While it hasn’t been clinically determined whether e-cigarettes are safe compared to regular tobacco products, Shaer said that, since the department is responsible for inmate health care, it’s not worth the risk.

“We don’t claim to know one way or the other if it’s safe or unsafe. But if we don’t know it’s safe, we’re not going to assume it’s safe,” he said.

And while some sheriffs may be seeing dollar signs, the Department of Corrections isn’t.

“There’s no amount of revenue that could make worthwhile the health risks,” Shaer said.