

Captive consumers

Big corporations reap big profits as they take over inmate finances and video visitations in Multnomah County

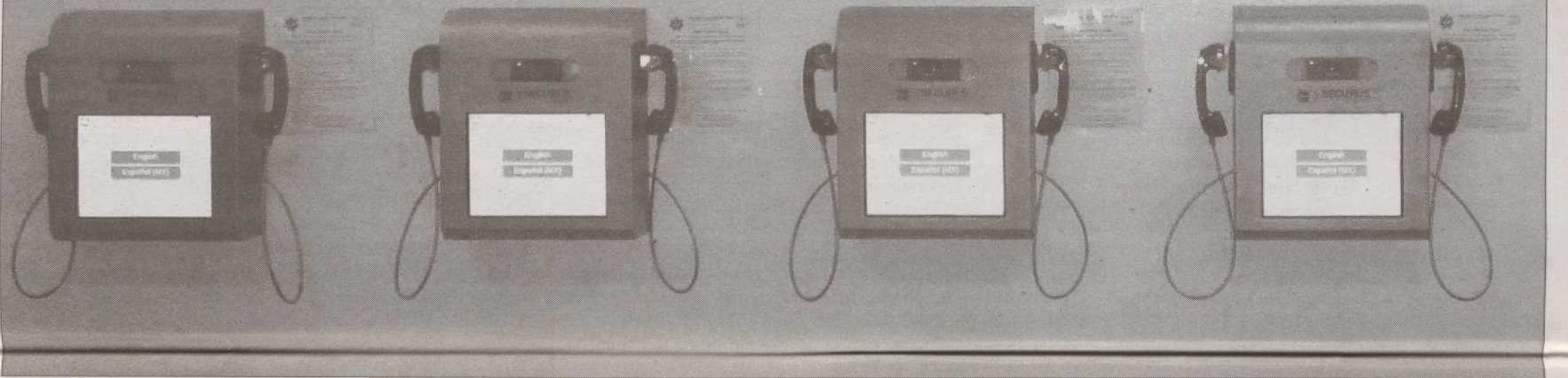


PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Four video visiting boxes hang on the wall in the lobby of Multnomah County Detention Center in downtown Portland. These boxes are currently being used to communicate with inmates at the Inverness Jail, as installation at MCDC has not been completed. These boxes will take the place of all non-professional in-person visits by the end of 2015.

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

There's big money to be made in our jails and prisons. Just ask Securus Technologies, Inc.

In 2013, the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) signed a four-year contract with the Texas-based prison-industry giant, allowing it and two other out-of-state corporations to begin profiting off Multnomah County inmates and their families — charging for services the county historically provided free of charge.

Under the terms of the contract, one of the three corporations is profiting every time a deposit is made onto a Multnomah County inmate's account, another profits from fees charged to inmates who are issued a debit card upon their release, and the third profits from its video visiting system. The contract requires the county to eventually eliminate in-person visiting and promote video visiting instead.

With the exception of attorney and other professional visits, all in-person visiting will be eliminated in Multnomah County correctional facilities by the end of this year, according to a MCSO spokesperson Lt. Steven Alexander. That's if the planned installation of the video visiting systems is completed on time. After the switch is made, family and friends of MCSO inmates will only be able to visit their locked-up loved ones by communicating through a box with an attached phone for audio and a

small video screen for visual. Prior to the video setup, visits in MCSO jails were done with the inmate and visitor only a few feet from each other, on a phone, with a piece of shatterproof glass between them.

Unless you're using the visitation kiosks in the jail, charges will apply.

Securus is only one of many companies profiting by charging families of prisoners money for services now outsourced from the correctional system. Today, Securus serves 2,600 facilities in 46 states. It boasts that it has paid \$1.3 billion in commissions to correctional facilities over the past 10 years. In 2009, the last year financial information was made publicly available, Securus brought in more than \$363 million in revenue.

Video "visits"

Video visiting has "really taken off over the past three years," says Prison Policy Initiative spokesperson Bernadette Rabuy. Her organization has been studying the prevalence and effects of video visiting across the country, and she says it's more common than she previously thought, with upwards of 500 facilities using the service. Visits can be conducted on site, usually from the lobby of a correctional facility, or remotely, which can benefit inmates whose families live far away, which is often the case with state facilities. But, says Rabuy, "In the county jail context, it's been really

harmful."

According to the Dallas Morning News, Dallas County, Texas, turned down a similar deal with Securus last year on the grounds that the "elimination of in-person visits was inhumane."

Rabuy says Securus is the only company offering video visiting that requires the elimination of in-person visits in all of its contracts. While the technology for video visiting has existed since the 1990s, Rabuy says most systems, including Securus's, still experience many glitches, with frozen screens, audio delays and poor picture quality. In testing, Rabuy says she experienced 10-second audio delays that made communication during the video visit virtually impossible.

Rabuy says her organization has found it's difficult for family members to determine the well being of an inmate through the small screen, something that's very important to them. They can't tell if the inmate has lost or gained weight or see changes in their skin tone. Prison Policy Initiative's study on video visiting will be released later this month.

Street Roots asked Multnomah County Sheriff Dan Staton if he thought the switch to video visiting at MCSO facilities would make visiting less personal than it was with face-to-face visits. In an e-mail response, his office didn't answer the question, but stated,

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