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"We are not the first ones to implement video visiting in Oregon or the nation. Frankly, we are behind the curve on this one and are the last large jail in Oregon to move to video visiting. Before, a person wishing to visit an inmate in MCSO custody had to travel down to the jail facility the inmate was housed at on a Saturday or Sunday, the scheduled visiting days for each facility."

The new system has its advantages, says Alexander, pointing out that now people can visit inmates, remotely, any day of the week and on holidays. Last month, for the very first time, inmates were able to receive "visits" on Christmas Day. He says in-person visitation will most likely be entirely eliminated by the end of January at Multnomah County Inverness Jail, and by the end of the year at Multnomah County Detention Center in downtown Portland.

Becky Straus, legislative director with the ACLU in Oregon, says on just face value, they don't have problems with the video visitation.

"Anything that can make it easier for inmates to be in touch with loved ones is a good thing," Straus said. "Burdensome fees

on accessing video chat, however, make visitation harder rather than easier, putting an additional fiscal burden on inmates and their families. In no circumstances should video chat be the only option for visitation. Eliminating in-person visits altogether is likely to make inmates feel more isolated and could lead to a greater chance of recidivism."

Between last May, when video visiting was introduced, and

mid December, 211 out of a total of 2,169 video visits were conducted remotely for \$5 each. The rest were conducted on-site and free of charge at a MCSO facility.

The county receives a 20 percent commission from each remote, paid video visit, but right now the commissions are going toward paying off the \$600,559 installation of Securus's systems. If remote, paid visits don't reach an average total of 1,265 per month, a number based on the county's average daily population, then Securus has the expressed right to renegotiate payments. It also has the right to raise the \$5 "promotional" cost of a remote visit up to as much as \$20 per 20-minute session, but county spokesperson Alexander says he doubts it will ever raise rates that high. On-site video visits conducted at MCSO facilities will always be free, he says.

Fees for services

Under the contract with Securus Technologies, MCSO also implemented a debit card system run by Numi Financial. Since the debit card's implementation last spring, the jail no longer returns personal cash to people released from jail. Instead, a person would receive a debit card loaded

with the money when they are released. They have five days to get their money off the card before it begins to incur a monthly maintenance fee of \$5.95. Fees also apply to non-preferred ATM withdrawals, balance inquiries and paper statements. The cards are given to everyone who was carrying cash when they were arrested, regardless of their length of stay at a MCSO facility.

Also based in Texas, TouchPay GenPar, LLC. was subcontracted through Securus to operate new kiosks in Multnomah County Correctional facility lobbies, enabling TouchPay to collect a fee every time someone puts money into an inmate's account. Alexander says the county plans to also use this system for posting bail.

The fees range from \$4 to \$8, depending on the amount and method of the deposit. If paying with a credit or debit card, 3.5 percent of the face value of the deposit is also tacked on to the total cost. Street Roots asked Multnomah County how much TouchPay has collected from deposits made to accounts within its corrections system, but the county does not keep record of that data, and TouchPay didn't respond to our inquiry by press time.

According to advocacy groups, excessive fees charged by for-profit prison-industry companies put an additional financial burden on inmates and their families, many of whom are living in poverty.

"These companies, like Securus, have figured out a way to monetize both human contact and the only way a prisoner's family can help them out," says Carrie Wilkinson, Phone Justice Director at Human Rights Defense Center. Her organization has been pushing for legislation that would regulate the fees charged by the prison communications industry.

Financial burdens

Portland resident Leslie McCarthy has a son serving time at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla, Ore. The fee charged by Access Corrections, the company contracted to handle inmate accounts at Two Rivers, jumps from \$2.95 to \$5.95 if she deposits \$20 or more. For this reason she deposits \$19.99 on his books each month so she can avoid the higher fee. She says she feels as though putting money on his account is a necessity. "You do way better in prison if you have money," she says. Without money, her son wouldn't be able to brush his teeth with toothpaste or wash his hair with shampoo, she says.

Multnomah County's decision to have a corporation take over the management of inmate monetary funds came after a 2011 county audit found the way the department handled cash was needlessly cumbersome, with staffers recounting the same bundles of cash multiple times. In light of the audit's recommendations, the county decided to do what many other correctional facilities across the country and the state have already been doing for some time – hand the responsibility over to an outside, for-profit agency. The move was projected to save the sheriff's office, with a budget of \$122.3 million in the last fiscal year, about \$23,000 annually.

Before the TouchPay kiosks were installed, visitors could put money on MCSO inmates' accounts without paying a fee. The county does not receive any portion of the profits garnered by TouchPay

from account deposits.

Street Roots asked Sheriff Staton how he would respond to someone who might say it's unfair to pass these costs onto inmates' friends and family, many of whom are experiencing poverty. In a written response, his office instead talked options: "The Sheriff's Office has historically absorbed all of the costs associated with handling cash deposits and processing those deposits... When we moved to this new system it provided better security controls and

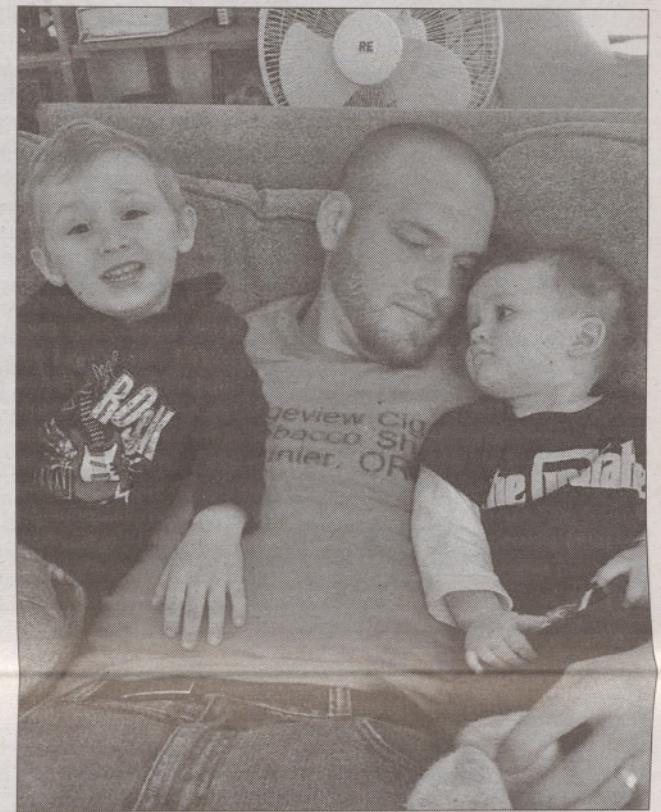


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accounting to comply with the County Auditor's recommendations, but we also looked to provide a solution that allowed more flexibility for someone to make a deposit on an inmate's account. With this new solution, there are now several ways to make a deposit to an inmate's account without even having to travel down to one of the jails. A family member or loved one can make a deposit over the Internet, or even call a 1-800-number to make a deposit over the phone."

These increased options, says the Sheriff's office, save time and cost of travelling down to a jail. But all of them also cost the family member or loved one between \$4 and \$8 per transaction. Other transactions, such as money orders and cashiers checks, are no longer accepted at the county per Securus' request in the contract.

"As a mom, you want to do everything you can to stay in contact with your child," says Tamra Craig, who works in Portland as a caregiver. Her son is currently serving time at the federal correctional facility in Sheridan, Ore. She often puts money on her son's prison account so he can buy phone and e-mail minutes and commissary items. She says she can barely afford the price of his incarceration. "The financial burden is more than I can express," she says.

Jason Angelo sits with his two young sons, Talon and Chris. While Angelo is serving time in Mill Creek, his wife and mother are making sacrifices so they can pay for the high costs of phone calls. His mother says it's important to her that he doesn't lose contact with his boys while he's away.

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