

CAPTIVE, from page 5

"Sometimes I forgo things at the grocery store."

According to Wilkinson at the Human Rights Defense Center, hiring companies like Securus is not how a government agency would traditionally fund its operations. "If the school district is running short of money, the school district doesn't go to the parents of all the kids and say, 'You have to pay \$50 each because we're running short of money,'" she says. "And in effect, that's what's happening. The only people that are providing this money are the prisoners' families, and in most cases they're poor and least able to provide this money."

Jimmie Stewart, whose son Jason Angelo is in Mill Creek Correctional Facility in Salem, says the financial burden of her son's incarceration is "very difficult." Her son's wife, a student, and his two young boys are living with Stewart and her husband in a two-bedroom apartment in Portland while her son serves his time.

Stewart and her family absorb costs associated with putting money on her son's books. Mill Creek employs JPay for account deposits, which, like TouchPay, charges a sliding scale of fees for its services. It costs \$3.95 to send a deposit of \$20 or less. This may not seem like a lot, but for someone with little means, it's a hefty fee. Angelo's wife has resorted to giving blood in order to put money on her husband's account.

Stewart says she's been trying to sort out a mistake made by JPay in November. She says she tried to send \$100 to her son, and while JPay accepted the payment, the prison says it never received it. She says JPay has acknowledged the mistake, but by press time, JPay had neither returned her money nor forwarded it to Mill Creek.

National studies show the majority of prisoners have at least one child under the age of 18. For some families, keeping the line of communication open between parent and child is important, even when doing so isn't affordable.

Stewart pays what her son's wife can't

toward phone charges in order to make sure her son doesn't lose contact with his sons.

"These are important times," she says. "His oldest son is in preschool, so he tells daddy everything he's done in school that day, and the 2-year-old is just starting to talk, so now he can tell daddy his new words," she says.

They've done video visiting a few times, but at \$9 per visit, she says it's too expensive.

Stewart's son works four days a week on a work crew at the prison, which pays him about \$40 a month, says Stewart – less than half of what she pays in phone charges most months.

Costly contact

Before the Multnomah County Sheriff signed the deal with Securus Technologies, the prison communications leader had already been pulling in millions of dollars from Multnomah County inmates and their families for years with high fees on collect calls. Under the 2013 contract with the county, Securus, along with its subcontractors, has expanded its revenue potential with the addition of inmate financial transactions and visitations. Local departments benefit with commissions.

In Multnomah County, Securus charges \$5.43 for a 15-minute local call. The commissions made by the county from phone calls go into the Inmate Welfare Fund, which was set up to pay for activities and services that benefit inmates. But over the past two fiscal years, \$92,521 was taken out of the Inmate Welfare Fund to pay for other things on the county's agenda, such as an Eastside Streetcar assessment. The Inmate Welfare Fund was one of only a handful of funds diverted as part of a supplemental budget both years.

The phone charges on inmate families caught the attention of Federal Communications Commission.

Last year the Human Rights Defense Center and other advocacy groups that were pushing for prison phone industry regulation celebrated a victory when the FCC capped

costs on interstate calls made from correctional facilities. Now, impending regulations from the FCC might also cap rates for local collect calls as well, which account for 85 percent of all calls made from county jails. The public comment period for the upcoming FCC decision ends Jan. 5, and a decision is expected by mid year.

After looking at data from 14 U.S. correctional facilities, the FCC estimates that in 2013, more than \$460 million was paid to correctional facilities in commissions off of phone charges alone. "This means that (inmates) and their families, friends and lawyers spent over \$460 million to pay for programs ranging from inmate welfare to roads to correctional facilities' staff salaries to the state or county's general budget," the FCC stated in a notice of the proposed cap.

According to MSCO's 2015 adopted budget, it's been collecting about \$400,000 a year from Securus in phone commissions over the past two years, but according to a MSCO spokesperson, that phone revenue has decreased since the FCC put caps on interstate collect calls.

The bulk of Securus's revenue comes from phone charges. If the FCC decides to cap fees for local calls as well, Securus and other prison communications companies might have to rely more heavily on other products and services for making money from their captive consumers.

Some consumers – at least those footing the bills – have fired back.

The Better Business Bureau lowered Securus's rating due to the number of complaints filed against it – 443 in the past three years. According to the BBB's Dallas and Northeast Texas website, where Securus is based, most complaints allege Securus "fails to provide acceptable product quality for its prison call services," and that it "fails to provide refunds in a timely manner." Last September the BBB contacted Securus, requesting that it eliminate the underlying reason for a pattern of consumer complaints, but it has yet to receive a written response to its request for voluntary compliance.

Securus boasted record growth in 2013,

Mothers of Incarcerated Sons Society

The three mothers of inmates Street Roots spoke with for this story are members of the national nonprofit Mothers of Incarcerated Sons Society Inc. Rhonda Robinson founded the group out of her Michigan home in 1992 after her own son went to prison. It has since grown to be an online support group with 1,800 members nationwide and 31 members in Oregon. MISS is open to anyone who has a loved one serving time in a correctional institution.

"Members are constantly posting discussions regarding their financial burdens with high phone rates," says Robinson. Her website hosts online discussions on different topics and serves as a source of support to people dealing with the pain of having an incarcerated family member. Many Members of the group are also actively advocating for changes to the prison system, tackling issues like mandatory minimum sentencing laws, solitary confinement and air conditioning in prisons.

In 2013 MISS held its first national conference in San Diego, and it plans to hold its second this year in Michigan.

To learn more, visit: mothersofinmates.org

and in a press release its president and CEO Richard Smith stated, "Our expanded product set of inmate phone calling, on-site and remote video visitation, data analytics, parolee GPS monitoring, jail management (IT Systems), location based wireless tracking services, interactive voice recognition systems – and 650 other products will allow us to grow and serve our customers well into the foreseeable future."

emily@streetroots.org

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- Jan. 31 - 27th Annual WinterFolk Benefit at the Aladdin Theater!

133 NW Sixth Ave.
Portland, OR 97209
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