

County should preserve in-person visitation

In a time when prison reform looks to be gaining momentum in Oregon and around the country, Multnomah County, one of the nation's most liberal counties, is headed in the wrong direction.

As reported by Street Roots earlier this month ("Captive consumers," Street Roots, Jan. 2), and in this week's edition (Revisiting visitation, pg. 4), Multnomah County Sheriff's Office has signed a contract with Securus Technologies Inc., agreeing to replace all

family and friend in-person visits at county jails with the Texas-based company's video-visiting service.

Securus is one of three private companies drawing revenue from people who are incarcerated in Multnomah County. TouchPay GenPar, also a Texas-based company, draws money from fees placed on inmate account deposits. And Numi Financial turns a profit from the transactions on debit cards – cards that are issued to every individual who is arrested and detained in the jail and used to reclaim his or her personal cash.

Securus is contracted with 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.

To add insult to injury, Street Roots reported that long before Multnomah County signed a deal with Securus Technologies for its video-visiting system, the

prison communications leader had already been pulling in millions of dollars from Multnomah County inmates and their families for years from high fees on collect calls.

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.

Multnomah County should renegotiate the contract with Securus to allow for in-person visitation. A U.S. Department of Justice report released in December states: "Incarcerated individuals have better outcomes when they receive in-person visits from family members and supportive community members."

The DOJ says that while video visiting can help to keep children in contact with their parents, it has the greatest benefits when it is used in addition to in-person visits, not as a replacement. We couldn't agree more. We have to preserve in-person visitation.

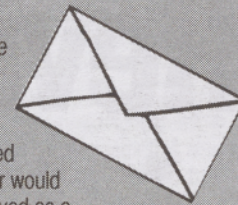
Moreover, Multnomah County shouldn't be using money made from inmates and their families to support projects outside of the jail. That's an end-run to a poor man's tax. The money made off of inmates should back toward programs that offer inmates the opportunity to be successful both inside the jail and upon release.

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EDITORIAL

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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Oregonian series an opportunity to seize the moment

A lot of people in the housing community, for better or worse, are worked up over Anna Griffin's ongoing series on homelessness in The Oregonian. Get used to it. A new story will come out every Friday for the next six weeks.

Wait, does this mean I'm promoting The Oregonian's series in Street Roots? I suppose I am.

Trying to capture the issue of homelessness in a meaningful way is no easy task for a reporter. The homeless crisis in America is dense and complex. From the disinvestment of federal funds over the past 30 years to local communities having to carry the water to the day-to-day realities of people living outdoors and how it affects the larger community – it's more than a handful to try to

capture in a meaningful way. Everyone has an opinion and an angle. Nobody who dedicates his or her life to this work wants to hear a story about how a specific plan has failed, or one that is framed in a way that may hurt a specific cause or agenda, especially when resources are involved and the political will to end the problem is genuine.

Writing a column and being the director of Street Roots – a newspaper that has been covering the issue of homelessness and poverty for years – I certainly understand the pressure that comes with trying to present these complex issues publicly in a way that's engaging, real and, most importantly, offers actual meaning. Depending on how you choose to frame a particular issue or topic may be the difference between the public becoming more engaged or simply not caring at all.

Here's the thing I've learned most about the issue of

homelessness and housing in Portland. Most people don't care about bureaucratic details or what insiders think about a specific topic. What people care about is finding out how they as a community can help. Whether you're an average citizen, a government official, law enforcement or part of the business community – nobody wants to see thousands of people suffering in our doorways and under bridges.

We all may have a different reason for ultimately coming to that realization – be it from a place of experience or compassion, economics or one's own self-interests. In the end, does it matter whether we can all agree that we need more resources to offer individuals and families housing in the region? I don't think so. What matters is capturing that collective sense of wanting to do something about the issue and then building the political will to carry it forward.

If the result of The Oregonian's reporting is getting mad and trashing The Oregonian instead of pivoting to seize the moment, then we've already failed. Believe me, I get it. It's easy to get caught up in bashing The Oregonian – and it might be even more tempting if the reports are followed with editorials condemning government action. Saying that, let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Like it or not, good reporting should always challenge our assumptions and help us understand the problem at a deeper level. Does this mean Anna Griffin and The Oregonian will get every single thing right in the series? Probably not, but that's not the point. Who among us does?

Having The Oregonian cover this issue gives housing advocates and government leaders an amazing opportunity to turn this conversation into action items that do something big to tackle the problem. How about we seize the moment?



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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