

Revisiting visitation

Plans to replace in-person visits with video screens in Multnomah County jails draws the scrutiny of county commissioners who want the face-to-face option preserved

BY EMILY GREEN
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Multnomah County Sheriff Dan Staton's plan to replace in-person visits with video visiting has caught the attention of county commissioners, who want to see it preserved.

Both County Chair Deborah Kafoury and Commissioner Loretta Smith asked the sheriff to consider keeping in-person visitation as an option in the county's jails during a meeting Wednesday morning.

County spokesman David Austin says the commissioners were surprised when they learned of Staton's new approach to visiting, and there will be further discussions.

As an independently elected official, Staton is free to sign contracts and make policy changes within his department without oversight from the Multnomah County Commissioners. According to Austin, Staton didn't consult with or notify the Board of County Commissioners before signing this contract.

While the commissioners can't tell the sheriff what to do, they do have some control over budget allocations for his department. Should the board decide to compel a change in Staton's position, squeezing the budget has traditionally been its only recourse.

As reported by Street Roots earlier this month ("Captive Consumers," Street Roots, Jan. 2), in 2013, Staton signed a contract with Securus Technologies Inc., agreeing to replace all family and friend in-person visits at county jails with Securus video-visiting service. Once installation is complete, the only way to visit an inmate in county jail will be through a video terminal in the jails' lobbies or a computer screen from a remote location. Securus' terminals have attached phones for audio and small display screens for visual. The camera's positioning above the display screen makes it impossible for the inmate and visitor to make eye contact during a video visit.

Staton told Street Roots that just because he signed a contract agreeing to the elimination of in-person visitation, doesn't mean it's set in stone.

"Yes, we have a contract, but amendments to the contract can be made," he says. The sheriff's office might move away from eliminating in-person visits if "the video visitation is something that's not

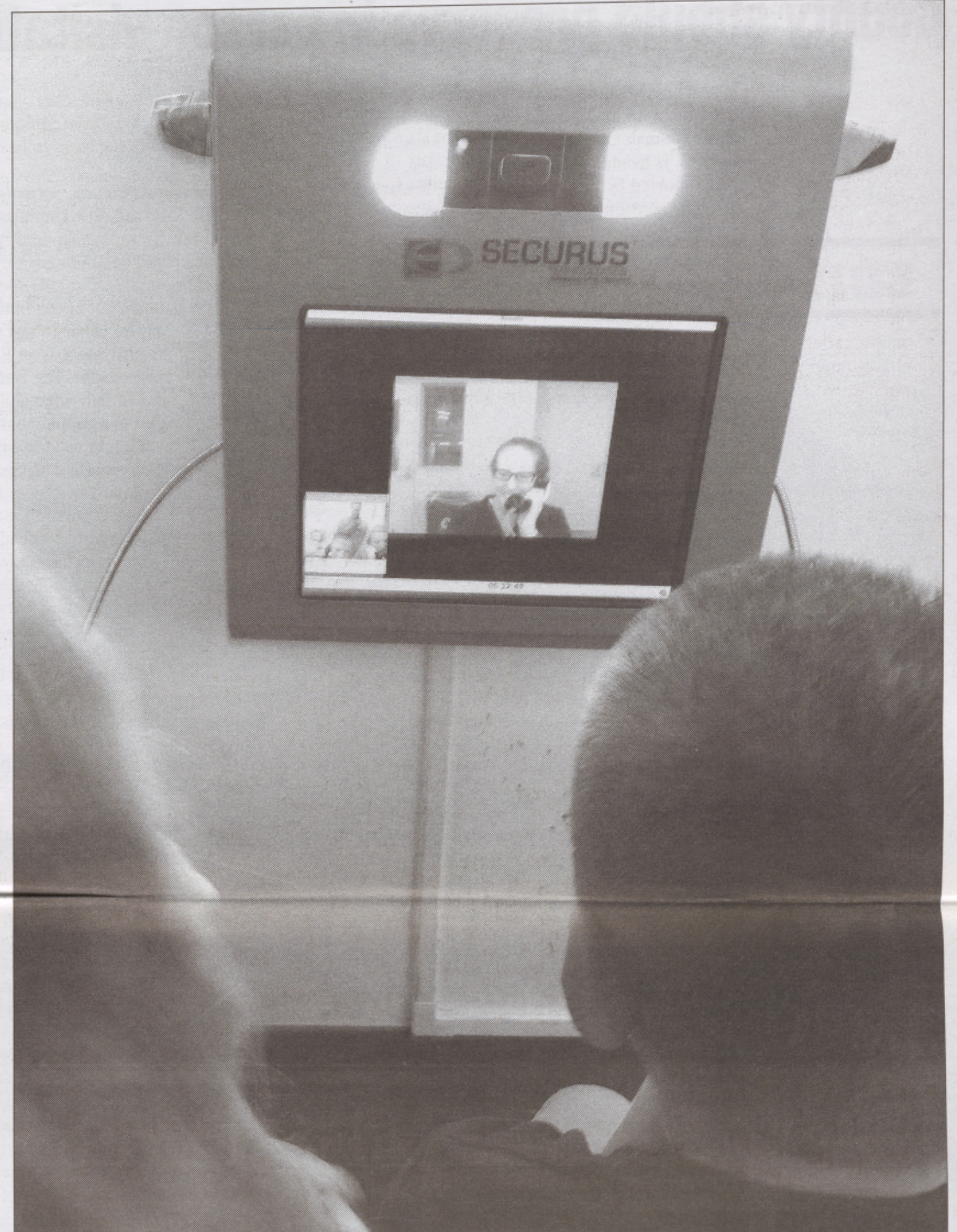


PHOTO BY STEVE BRASE

This Securus video visiting terminal is similar to the terminals going into Multnomah County jails. Pictured here are Steve Brase's two teenage children visiting with their mother from the lobby of Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility in Santee, Calif., where she is incarcerated. Brase says that during visits there is no privacy, the image of his wife on the screen is grainy, and there's a three- to four-second audio and visual delay. "We had to learn to just keep talking so there was no break. It was terrible," he says.

being adjusted to by our inmates, and it's something that's causing difficulties for our staff, and it's not cost efficient," he says, but "what we want to do is we want to try to eliminate as much of the visitations as possible."

A new study on video visiting may point to ethical issues with the elimination of in-person visitation. The study, released last week by the nonprofit organization Prison Policy Initiative (PPI), found the technology has many benefits when used as an additional means of visitation. But when it replaces in-person visits altogether, it goes against correctional best practices and is so impersonal in nature that it calls into question whether video visiting can really be called visiting at all.

The PPI study examines video visiting in state prisons and county jails across the country. It documents many glitches in the

technology and highlights Securus' particularly demanding contractual requirements. For one, Securus requires that facilities abolish in-person visitation in order to boost its video visiting sales. Dallas County, Texas, was able to negotiate out of this requirement, but it did so before the contract was signed. Bernadette Rabuy, one of the study's authors, says she is not aware of any facility negotiating out of eliminating in-person visitation after signing the contract.

Securus did not respond by press time to Street Roots' inquiry about whether this was a possibility.

Staton is also allowing Securus to control at least one policy matter that would normally be handled by elected and

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