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appointed officials. When he signed the contract, he surrendered the county's authority to place limits on an inmate's visitation. The contract requires each terminal be available for use at least 80 hours each week and states that except for instances of punishment, inmates cannot be barred from using video visiting or limited in their access to the terminals.

On Jan. 12, the Human Rights Defense Center, a national prisoners' rights group, submitted a comment to the Federal Communications Commission, citing Multnomah County's move to eliminate in-person visits under the direction of Securus as an example of why video visitation needs to be regulated.

"Human contact in the form of in-person visits has an even more significant effect than telephone calls, not only on recidivism but on prisoner behavior, and cannot be eliminated in the name of profit," the center states.

It's well documented that interactions with family and friends while incarcerated reduce inmates' likeliness of reoffending after release. Denying a prisoner the opportunity to see loved ones in the flesh contradicts the prevalent philosophy in the corrections industry that visitation is an important part of rehabilitation. The American Correctional Association, the accreditation agency for U.S. correctional facilities, has also emphasized the importance of family visitation and does not support charging for visits.

In its survey, PPI found video-visiting systems have become standard practice, with the service available in more than 500 facilities nationwide.

Video visitation has some advantages. Because inmates of state prisons are often shipped long distances from where they live after being convicted, it can serve as a convenient alternative for family members and friends of inmates who would otherwise have to drive a significant distance to visit.

However, inmates of county jails, many of whom are awaiting trial and have not yet been convicted of any crime, often have friends and family who live in close proximity. While most state prisons have kept in-person visiting available after installing video visiting, 74 percent of county jails banned in-person visits when video visitation was adopted, according to PPI's study. Its authors also point out that on average, only 40 percent of county jail inmates nationally have been convicted of a crime, and in most cases the crimes are misdemeanor offenses.

In Multnomah County, video visits conducted from the jail lobby are free, and

will remain free, but this isn't always the case. According to PPI, in Lincoln County, the only visiting option inmate families have is paid, remote video visiting. In Multnomah County, remote visits conducted offsite via a computer are currently offered at an introductory rate of \$5 per 20-minute visit, but the price is expected to increase once installation is complete and video visits become the only visiting option for people other than attorneys, clergy and other professionals.

Staton emphasizes that the jails' current in-person visitation is conducted with a clear plexiglass wall between visitor and inmate.

"There's no in-person visits," Staton says. "There's always a physical barrier there."

PPI's study indicates sheriffs usually defend the transition from in-person, through-glass visits to video visits as being insignificant as both involve shatterproof glass and talking on a phone. To families of inmates, however, replacing the real, living person on the other side of the glass with a grainy computer image is a step too far.

PPI also found that unlike Skype or FaceTime, video visitation systems – including Securus' – are unreliable, with audio lags, pixilated images, screen freezes and user complaints about paid-for minutes lost due to glitches in the system. The study attributes the failure of the prison-industry to fix these problems with its technology to the fact that it considers jails and prisons to be its customers – not the people who pay for the service and experience its shortcomings.

According to PPI, friends and family of inmates pay as much as \$1.50 a minute for video visits in some counties – and they're some of the poorest people in the country, making them the least likely to have access to computers with webcams and the necessary bandwidth to conduct remote visits. They are also disproportionately people of color, both nationally and in Oregon.

According to the Department of Corrections' latest inmate population profile, racial minorities made up nearly 22 percent of Oregon's total population, but 26 percent of its inmate population. The largest overrepresentation is among African Americans, who are six times more likely than Caucasians to be incarcerated in Oregon jails and prisons.

Multnomah County Sheriff's Office spokesman Lt. Steven Alexander says during startup testing of the county's video visiting system last week there were some connectivity issues and bugs being worked out.

Staton says he hasn't actually seen the video visiting in use yet, although kiosks have been in use in the county's

Prison Policy Initiative

Bernadette Rabuy, policy and communications associate at the Prison Policy Initiative, and Peter Wagner, attorney and executive director at Prison Policy Initiative, authored the study featured in this story. Prison Policy Initiative is a non-partisan, Massachusetts-based nonprofit founded in 2001. Its mission is to challenge over criminalization and mass incarceration through research, advocacy and organizing.

downtownjail since May.

"I haven't actually looked at it, but the way it's been presented to me over the last couple years, through the process, is that everything is very clear, concise; there's no delays," Staton says. "It's a much better process than actually doing the video cams through a computer setup, but now that this has been brought to my attention, I actually want to see that process in person now."

While the Sheriff's Office denied Street Roots' request to have a terminal in use demonstrated before press time, it says it will at a later date.

Alexander says, to his knowledge, no formal complaints about system glitches have been filed with his department. He said his office has received positive feedback from visitors about their ability to schedule their visits and the expanded visiting hours that are available under video visiting. It's available seven days a week whereas in-person visiting is only available two days a week. While installation of the new system is underway, in-person visiting is still available.

The video visitation contract was not Securus' first deal with Multnomah County. It's been making millions off county inmates for years by collecting fees on inmate phone calls. Under the terms of its new contract with the county, two additional out-of-state corporations are also making money from charges on inmate account deposits and debit cards given to inmates upon their release. The debit cards hold any cash the inmate had on his or her person at their time of arrest, and they have five days to get their cash off the card or it begins to incur fees.

When courting jails and prisons, Securus claims its service will reduce the amount of contraband that gets inside a facility's walls and increase security and safety. PPI's research found there is no evidence to back up these claims, and in some cases, facilities have experienced the opposite result. PPI cites a study conducted by Texas Criminal

Justice Coalition: "Disciplinary cases for possession of contraband in Travis County, Texas, increased 54 percent after the county completed its transition to video-only visitation." Additionally, video terminals are often positioned right next to each other. The public location of the visits has actually increased tensions in some jails, leading to fights among inmates, the study found.

Street Roots asked the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office what it thought about the results of PPI's study. Office spokesman Alexander says the Sheriff's Office does not have time to review this most recent study, but that it has seen previous studies that state the pros and cons of video visiting. He says the sheriff will review the system annually to see if changes need to be made in order to make the system better and more efficient, and he will review the elimination of in-person visiting, as well.

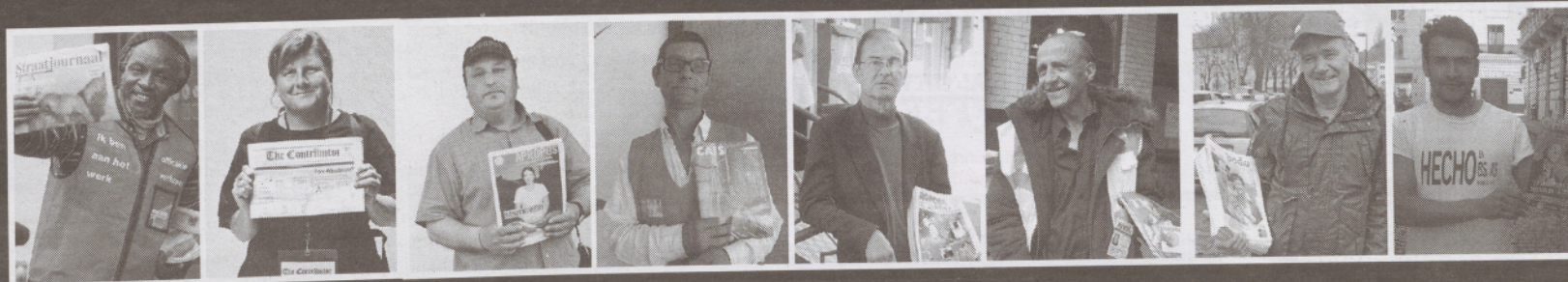
Under the terms of the contract, if the contract between the county and Securus is terminated within five years of the beginning of its initial term, the county will be on the hook for the \$600,559 installation of the video visiting system. While Securus is currently picking up that tab in expectation of future revenues through visitation charges, Staton says if he decides keeping in-person visits is best for inmates, he is willing to have the county pay the installation costs of the system.

Previous studies, as mentioned by Alexander, have been conducted on the effects of video visiting. When compared with in-person visits, all studies state video visiting should never serve as the only option for visitation.

The U.S. Department of Justice released a report on video visiting in December stating, "Studies confirm that 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.

A 2012 study from The Sentencing Project focused on video visiting's effect on children of inmates. It concluded that the benefit to children relied heavily on policies surrounding its implementation, most notably that it should not be cost-prohibitive and should not replace contact visits.

Additionally PPI's study found, "Video visitation can add to the already significant trauma that children of incarcerated parents face, especially for young children who are unfamiliar with the video technology."



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