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County phone deal will save families money



Dec. 4, 2012 Board President Toni Preckwinkle is signing a contract Tuesday that will drastically reduce the cost of phone calls for jail detainees and their families.

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County looks to kill revenue on jail calls



Apr. 4, 2012 Preckwinkle says she and Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart are trying to figure out how to eliminate "extraordinary and exorbitant" phone charges at the jail.

Hiked charges for inmates: Bad for County



Apr. 3, 2012 A prison watchdog group in Chicago says Cook County isn't doing itself any favors by charging inflated phone rates to inmates in the jail. Inmates pay about \$7 for 15-minute phone calls.

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Jail's phone contracts in spotlight



Apr. 2, 2012 Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle and Sheriff Tom Dart say they're reviewing a controversial phone contract at the jail that charges inmates inflated phone rates.

Preckwinkle: End \$15 phone charges in jail



Mar. 14, 2012 Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle is calling on the jail to stop a phone service that charges inmates \$15 for 15-minute calls.

Phone contract costs inmates



Mar. 14, 2012 Mimi Mattel has a lot going on in her life right now. She's in jail and she's currently transitioning from a man to a woman.*

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[Navy Pier Sunset](#)

Cook County making millions off inmates' phone calls



Mar. 13, 2012 Cook County government is making money off people who are locked up in the county jail. It sounds conspiratorial, but it's true. People who are arrested pay substantial fees to support the system that is detaining and prosecuting them.



Photo of the Day
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WBEZ91.5

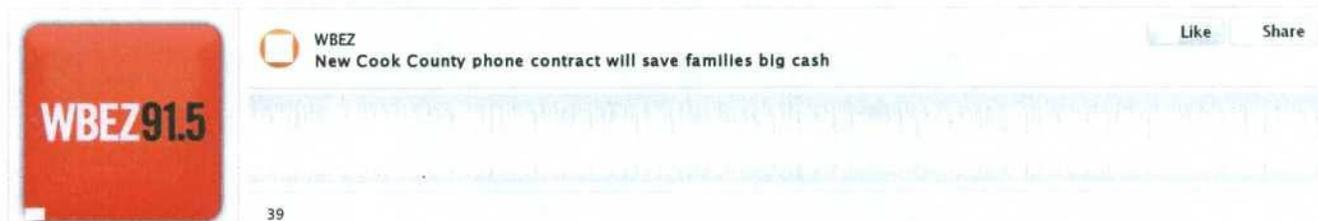
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New Cook County phone contract will save families money

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle will sign a contract Tuesday to drastically reduce the cost of phone calls for jail detainees and their families.

December 4, 2012



For a long time inmates at the Cook County Jail and their mostly poor families have been hammered by the high cost of phone calls. That's partly because the county has been making a profit from the calls detainees make to people outside.

But county board President Toni Preckwinkle will sign a new contract Tuesday to significantly reduce the cost of those calls. The county will continue to make \$300,000 a month off the deal.

Cecily Cortez works as a housekeeper at the Marriott Hotel on Michigan Avenue and has a son. Her fiancé was charged with residential burglary. The calls from him are expensive, but she said they're priceless and way better than letters.

"You get to hear his voice, feel his emotions through his words and pretty much it's just more contact rather than something written," Cortez said.

The cost of phone calls is tough on Monica Ingram too. She's a nurse providing homecare for a quadriplegic person. She recently received a text from her cell phone company saying she needed to pay her bill before she could receive more collect calls from the jail. She'd already spent \$60 on the calls that week and broke down into tears as she said she's been forced to start ignoring her son's calls.

"That bothers me and that bothers me, because he always says 'don't stress, I don't want you to stress over anything' but I got to deny his calls sometimes," Ingram said. "What can you do?"



The county has given an exclusive contract to Securus Technologies, a company that, according to its website, operates phone systems in 2,200 jails and prisons across the country. Securus charges inflated phone rates then pays back to Cook County 57.5 percent of the revenue.

When WBEZ first reported on this last spring, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle said she thought it was wrong for the county to view inmates as a revenue source, but the county continues to make \$300,000 a month from the contract. And next year's budget counts on at least another \$3 million. Preckwinkle's long-term plan is still to stop the practice.

"So the president has made it abundantly clear that by 2014 all of the calls in Cook County will be revenue neutral, or I won't be here," said Cook County chief information officer Lydia Murray. "We will not be talking. So she has made it abundantly clear that this year is a transition year and we're lowering the rates."

Since September, it's been Murray's job to oversee the contract. She negotiated the new deal with the phone company, which Preckwinkle is announcing Tuesday.

"They are going to cut many of the calls in half and double the time that detainees can talk to their family and friends," Murray said.

For example, Securus charges a more than \$3 connection fee for every call and calls are cut off after 15 minutes so the caller has to pay another connection fee. Now calls can last as long as 30 minutes. Including the per-minute rates, under the new deal a 30-minute call will cost \$7. Last spring, that would have cost \$30.

Under Preckwinkle the county was able to ring out millions of dollars in concessions from Securus.

The company did not immediately return calls for comment.

Cook County Board Commissioner Larry Suffredin said it seems the county wasn't paying much attention to how the contract affected the families of inmates.



"I think that we were asleep at the switch," Suffredin said. "The company sees this as a very valuable contract for them, and once we put some pressure on them they seemed very amenable to re-negotiating this contract."

The new deal extends the Securus contract by a year, which means it gets to keep exclusive access to 9,000 detainees who make 160,000 calls a month. Under the new plan, detainees and their families will have fewer calling plans to choose from, but a 15-minute call will be \$4 instead of \$10 or \$15. The price could come down even more if the county gives up its \$3.5 million in yearly profits by 2014.



WBEZ91.5

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Preckwinkle: Inmate phone calls should not be county revenue source

April 4, 2012

A correction has been made to this story.

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle (D-Chicago) says the county should not be profiting from phone calls made by inmates at the county jail.

Preckwinkle says she and Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart are in discussions to figure out how to eliminate "extraordinary and exorbitant" phone charges at the jail.

Some calls are \$15 for 15 minutes. Most are \$7 or \$10 for 15 minutes. They're so expensive because the phone contract requires the company, Securus Technologies, to pay 57.5 percent of the revenue from the calls back to the county. The county has made \$12 million in the last three years from the contract, but Preckwinkle and the board of commissioners appear ready to give up that revenue stream.

"I don't think that, that it's appropriate for the county to look at inmate phone calls as a revenue source," says Preckwinkle.

It's a sentiment that has a lot of support on the county board. Commissioner Bill Beavers (D-Chicago) says the "county shouldn't be making any money off these, okay, phone calls should be at a reasonable cost." He says, "I think it's ridiculous and we're looking at trying to make some changes. Hopefully we'll be able to look at that contract because that's really too much money."

Every commissioner I talked to this week agrees with Beavers. "I had a dad call me who said to me that he's paid more in phone charges than he's paid in getting his son out of jail," says Commissioner Robert Steele (D-Chicago). "That's not an income source for us."

Commissioner Jeff Tobolski (D-LaGrange) says, "I am surprised by what I am seeing in here and I don't agree with the policies as they exist."

The political will certainly seems to be against this phone contract, but if everyone now agrees that it inappropriately takes advantage of poor people who are locked up, one wonders how it got passed in the first place?

"We have to work backwards on this problem, find out, you know, when did this contract come about? Who touched it? What was presented to the board? And make sure that we don't get into these situations again," says Tobolski.

The contract with Securus was originally signed by former Cook County Board President Todd Stroger. However, in June, Preckwinkle signed off on some changes to it. According to an email obtained by WBEZ, the Bureau of Technology under Preckwinkle pushed for a change to the fee structure, in part to bring in an extra \$600,000 each year in additional revenue. Preckwinkle says it was Sheriff Tom Dart who pushed for the contract.

I caught up with Dart earlier this week outside the jail and he said that's only partially true. "I tell them what we want the phone system to do and then who they pick as the vendors, that's really their call. I really don't have any decision there and I could honestly care less."

Dart says he pushed for Securus because they provide a good phone service, recording phone calls so they can be monitored for illegal activity. He says Securus helps them stop several attempted murders for hire every year. It's clear from emails obtained by WBEZ that at least some of Dart's employees were aware that the county was making a profit, but Dart says he didn't know until WBEZ raised the issue with his office last month. He says he doesn't get any benefit from the profit because it all goes into the general revenue fund. He says the revenue portion of the contract doesn't affect him so he didn't pay any attention to it. He says the county board is responsible for contracts.

"Do I have time to do the county board's job? No," says Dart. "They get paid a nice salary; they should do their job, I do my job. If they gave me a phone system that did not work, then they'd be hearing from me, but do I have time to go through all the different contracts that they give out that deal with the jail? No."

At a county board meeting Wednesday commissioners questioned a Forest Preserve District employee about a \$239,000 dollar contract to buy picnic tables. Cook County commissioners spend a lot of time in their board meetings going over contracts and purchases.

COMMISSIONER BEAVERS: How many tables did we buy last year?

FOREST PRESERVE EMPLOYEE: Last year we did not buy any tables.

BEAVERS: All right, about 3 years ago we bought wooden tables.

EMPLOYEE: The last time we purchased tables we purchased two thousand table.

PRECKWINKLE: Alright, Commissioner Sims.

SIMS: Are these tables light where people are picking them up and putting them and taking them away?

EMPLOYEE: They are not light by any means, these are very heavy duty picnic tables.

One would think that a board that pursues picnic table construction with such vigor might be aware of a clause in the phone contract that provides the county \$4 million a year from the pockets of some of the poorest residents in the county, but commissioners say they didn't know about it. In their defense the board does often sign off on dozens of contracts and purchases at each meeting. Take the phone contract. It's 70 pages long and I can tell you it's not terribly interesting reading.

Republican commissioner Pete Sylvestri, who represents parts of Northwest Chicago and suburbs, says, "The board is not a day-to-day administrator obviously, it's a board. It oversees policy and procedures and contracts and so forth."

Sylvestri brings the blame game full circle. "This should have been caught at the administrative level before it came to the board. Either the Sheriff's office or the president's office should have caught that and thought of these concerns that we're talking about today before it comes to the board."

Whatever the case, Preckwinkle, Dart, and the county board now all seem to agree that the county shouldn't be making a profit from inmate's phone calls and commissioners say they plan to take some action.

"I can just tell you that we are very concerned and that it is being addressed and hopefully in a few weeks you'll be able to report that we have gone in and worked hard to correct the problem," says Tobolski.

As for how the county board is going to replace the \$4 four million the county makes from the phone calls, Tobolski says it's their job to figure something out. That's what they do.

Clarification: An earlier version of this story said all calls from the jail are recorded. Phone calls between inmates and attorneys are not recorded.

WBEZ91.5

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Overcharging inmates for phone calls bad for county

April 3, 2012

A prison watchdog group in Chicago says Cook County isn't doing itself any favors by charging inflated phone rates to inmates in the jail. Inmates pay about \$7 for 15-minute phone calls. The calls are so expensive because Cook County government inflates the rates and makes about \$4 million a year from the contract for the phone service, provided by Securus Technologies.

John Maki with the John Howard Association says the county shouldn't be putting up barriers for inmates trying to stay connected to their families.

"Study after study show that communication is critical for when an inmate gets out of prison," says Maki. "It actually helps decrease recidivism and it's really in our interests to make sure that happens."

Maki says criminal justice is a vital public service and should not be treated as a business. "When you inject motives of profit into the administration of justice, you're going to distort it absolutely."

The county board is reviewing the contract and several commissioners agree that the county should not be making money from it.

WBEZ91.5

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Preckwinkle and Dart reviewing jail phone contract

April 2, 2012

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle and Sheriff Tom Dart say they're reviewing a controversial phone contract at the jail that charges inmates inflated phone rates. On the high end, calls can cost \$15 for 15 minutes. The cheap calls are about \$7, though the county could immediately cut that price in half.

The county's contract with the phone company, Securus, requires the company to pay the county 57.5 percent of the revenue from the calls. It equals about \$4 million a year, but that money comes from the largely poor families of inmates, many of whom can't even afford to post bond to get their loved one out of jail while awaiting trial.

Through spokesmen, Preckwinkle and Dart have both been blaming each other for the contract. Those spokesmen say the two elected officials are reviewing the contract, though they say it would be premature to comment further.

Both Preckwinkle and Dart have refused WBEZ's repeated requests over the last several weeks to personally discuss the issue.

WBEZ91.5

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Preckwinkle calling for end to \$15 phone charges in Cook County Jail

March 14, 2012

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle is calling on the jail to stop a phone service that charges inmates \$15 for 15-minute calls. According to Preckwinkle's spokesman, the board president just learned about the \$15 calls when WBEZ approached her office for comment last week.

Preckwinkle's office said the agreement for the \$15 calls did not go through her office. She's recommending that the county discontinue what she calls a side deal which that Sheriff Tom Dart made with Securus Technologies, the company that has an exclusive contract to run the phone system in the jail.

Securus Technologies will not explain to WBEZ why those calls have to cost \$15, or what that \$15 pays for.

Preckwinkle and Dart have both been denying that they pushed for the revenue sharing contract with Securus. The contract charges the mostly poor inmates severely inflated phone rates and then the phone company pays 57 and a half percent, about \$4 million a year, back to the county.

Preckwinkle says with a general funds deficit of \$500 million going into 2011 the county decided to renew the deal.

Stopping the \$15 calls would still leave most of the Securus contract intact and the county would continue to get most of its revenue, too.

WBEZ91.5

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Cook County phone contract costs inmates and families

March 14, 2012



Mimi Mattel has a lot going on in her life right now. She's in jail and she's currently transitioning from a man to a woman.

"You know not a lot of transgenders have support from their family, and thank God my mom is behind 100 percent about my transition and so it doesn't matter how much times I call, doesn't matter what the cost is, she's going to always answer," says Mattel.

But the cost is high. The calls are \$7 on the low end, but can be as high as \$15. The rates are inflated because Cook County makes money on the calls. The county has a contract with Securus technologies that requires the phone company to pay almost 60 percent of what it makes from phone calls back to the county. The deal has netted the county about \$12 million over the life of the three-year-old contract. The cost falls on the mostly poor families who can't afford to post bond so their loved ones are left in jail while awaiting trial. Those families pay for calls they can't afford, either.

Mattel is wearing an orange jumpsuit and sitting at a metal table in a windowless dayroom at Cook County. She refers to the jail as a billion-dollar franchise. She says, "Sometimes I be so depressed and I want to talk to my mother, my brothers, my sisters and my family and I have to call them so I have to make sure that my mom keeps money on the phone."

"Money's hard to come by now days. Even for people out there, the economy's so messed up. These people can't constantly have to be forced to pay 10, 15 dollars for a phone call even if it is to speak to their loved ones," says Ava, another inmate living on the wing set aside for transgendered people. This is probably a good place to say that the fact that Ava and Mattel are transgendered has nothing specific to do with this story. They just happen to be the inmates who were available to talk about phone rates when we visited the jail. Anyway, Ava says she likes to call her sister but hasn't talked to her in a month and a half. "These phones were made purposely to separate us from speaking with our loved ones and from getting the support that we need. And the way that they do that is by implementing these charges," says Ava.

Actually Ava couldn't be more wrong on that point, according to Bob Pickens, the COO for Securus. "Do you want the call to go out? Yeah, we all want the call to go out because we want the inmate to be able to contact the friend and family member, hopefully to set up an account," says Pickens. He says the company and the county don't make money unless inmates can contact the family members who will pay for phone calls.

As for the \$15 calls, according to county numbers, inmates made more than 10,000 calls at that rate in just one month. So in our phone conversation I asked Pickens to explain why those calls need to be so expensive. I asked him to tell me what that \$15 pays for, but he says he can't tell me. He says, "I don't know first of all, and two, that would be proprietary information. We're a private company, we don't disclose profits."

Pickens says they do run an automated announcement on each of those \$15 calls. "We're making sure everybody hears that they can set up an account and avoid those types of charges in the future, just set up an account. You can get a call much cheaper than paying 15 bucks for it."

As I was reporting for this story I spent time at the Cook County Court Building talking to families who were there attending hearings for loved ones behind bars. All the families - all of them - were outraged by their experiences paying inflated phone charges.

But this isn't just an issue in Cook County. Securus has contracts with a total of 2,200 jails and prisons. According to its website, the Dallas-based company provides phone service for 850,000 inmates. It's one of several large companies offering this kind of phone service where governments can turn a profit. There's a simmering national backlash against these companies. In an attempt to raise public awareness on the issue, one group keeps an answering machine where people can leave their stories and then the stories are posted online. There's one particularly moving story left by a mother who says her son has stayed in touch with only five people because they were the only family members who could afford to accept the calls, and now that she's preparing materials for his parole hearings she's worried that he won't be able to prove that he has enough family support to get out. [Here's a link to the Thousand Kites project](#) where you can hear those stories.

According to the Center for Media Justice, eight states have passed laws banning jail phone contracts that generate revenue for government bodies.

Securus, the company in Cook County Jail, has contracts all over the state of Illinois, including profit-sharing contracts with the jails in nearby Lake and DuPage counties. The number one selling point that Securus pushes on their website, isn't about phone service, it's that Securus can generate revenue for governments.

"We're providing a service that allows inmates and friends and family to maintain relationships and for that service, which costs us a lot of money to put in place, we make an average profit for a telecommunications business," says Securus COO Bob Pickens.

I asked him what an average profit was for a telecommunications business, and he was unwilling to give even a range of profit the company makes.

Here's what we do know. Securus was purchased at the end of last year by Castle Harlan, a private equity firm. The press release from that purchase says Castle Harlan manages investment funds worth about \$3.5 billion. Castle Harlan is unwilling to say how much they paid for Securus or how much profit it makes.

We do, however, know how much the county is making from the deal with Securus: \$12 million over the last three years. Securus charges inflated rates and then makes monthly payments back to the county. Pickens says the calls are expensive but it would be easy to lower the prices.

"The largest portion of the charge is the commission back to the county government," says Pickens.

The county gets 57.5 percent of all the phone revenue billed. We asked Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle to talk with us about it, but she declined. Owen Kilmer, a spokesman for Preckwinkle, said the Cook County sheriff pushed this contract, and Kilmer says, "This is an operational issue in the jail and falls under the purview of the Sheriff's office."

Frank Bilecki is a spokesman for Sheriff Tom Dart. "We are not receiving any revenue whatsoever from this," says Bilecki. He says the sheriff's office was at the table to talk about the phone technology, but had nothing to do with setting phone rates. Bilecki says it was the Bureau of Technology under Preckwinkle that selected the rates inmates would pay. Those rates can be set higher or lower and that impacts how much money the county gets.

"The president's signature is on the contract. The revenue that is brought in from this contract does not go into the sheriff's department or the sheriff's office for spending. It goes into the general revenue fund for the county, which can be used for anything and everything," says Bilecki, adding that all that money is controlled by Preckwinkle.

WBEZ91.5

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In Cook County, the costs of catching a case

March 13, 2012

Cook County government is making money off people who are locked up in the county jail. It sounds conspiratorial, but it's true. People who are arrested pay substantial fees to support the system that is detaining and prosecuting them. And even if they're found not guilty, they don't get any of that money back. This week we're starting a series we're calling "The Costs of Catching a Case" that looks at the millions of dollars Cook County makes each year by putting people in jail.

We start with a young man named Marvin Gresham Jr. He was arrested in December, a few days after he turned 17. He'd been arrested before, but he'd always gone to juvenile facilities. This was his first time in county, so when he called his dad, Marvin Sr. put up the \$15 it takes to accept the collect call.

"He was afraid. He was very afraid," says Gresham. Gresham grew up in Englewood, and when he was 18 he spent about a year in county jail himself. He says "it's important to the inmate, the person that's locked up that he knows, that he or she knows that somebody cares, you know, about them. Being in jail is like being dead."

Now, sitting at his kitchen table flipping through his bank statement from the last month, Gresham is seeing what it cost him to be there for his son, to accept all those phone calls at \$15 apiece, paid up front or else the call doesn't go through. "It's just a rip off. The calls are being done to people that live in the ghetto. These calls, are, they not right," he says despondently.

Gresham has a little trouble going through his bank statement. He never finished high school and he seems to have some difficulty reading. Gresham does contracting work when he can get it. He's fixed up the apartment he and his fiancé are renting. They put in new flooring, some new carpet, refinished the kitchen cabinets so they're shiny and put in a new counter. His fiancé works the evening shift at the McDonalds at the skyway oasis, near one of the tollbooths. They're barely getting by. We look at his account balance from the beginning of the month. "We had a little money in the bank, you know, at the time,

just a little, I think it was \$330 and they took \$120 dollars of that from us. It was \$330 and this is our main bank account, the only one we have. We have nothing more," says Gresham.

The bank statement shows 8 charges for phone calls at \$14.99 apiece. A third of Gresham and his fiancé's net worth was spent on those phone calls, and that's from just one month. "Fifteen dollars is a lot. It buys a meal in my house and it helps to pay the light bill, the gas bill and everything else. It's just a loss, a loss that we didn't need."

Gresham could have reduced his phone charges if he'd set up an account with the company that runs the phones in the jail during the two months his son was there. The calls would have dropped to about \$7 each, but whether it's \$7 or \$15 for 15 minutes, the question remains the same: Why are the calls so expensive?

For starters, Cook County makes money on each call and not just a little money. Using the Freedom of Information Act I got a copy of the contract between the county and Securus Technologies, the company that operates the jail phone service. The contract requires Securus to pay 57.5 percent of the revenue from phone calls back to the county. Last year that netted the county government more than \$3.6 million. In the last three years under this contract the county has pulled in about \$12 million from inmates making calls out of the county jail, according to numbers supplied by the county. It's like the ultimate command economy. The county locks up the inmate. In order to communicate with family and arrange their defense, the inmate has to use the phones. Cook County has given an exclusive contract to Securus, which sets the phone rates and prohibits any competition, and then the county gets more than half of the revenue generated.

Howard Brookins is a Chicago alderman, but he's also an attorney and he says he still handles about 20 cases a year. I ran into him at the courthouse when I was there talking to families about the rates they're paying. "It just doesn't seem as though you should be rippin' those folks off. Yes it may cost a little more than a regular collect call that you may make today, but it should not cost that much more because quite frankly, phone calls are cheap. And anybody with a cellular phone and unlimited minutes knows that it doesn't cost \$15 for 15 minutes or a dollar a minute to make a phone call," says Brookins.

Brookins says he ran for state's attorney a few years ago to address these kinds of inequities. He says inmates can be charged all sorts of fees because the public doesn't have much sympathy for those who commit crimes. But there's a dirty secret, he says. "Their bills are paid by mothers and grandmothers, and it's a tremendous burden on them with the number of phone calls also that they receive from their particular loved one because, again, they're there with nothing else to do."

Brookins points out that most of the people in jail waiting to go to trial are poor. If they weren't, they would have posted bond and gotten out of there. Of course there are people who have really high bonds because they're accused of extremely serious crimes but

most of the people have low bonds, and Brookins says if they don't have money for bond, they don't have money for pricey phone calls either. But he says, politically, it's easy to levy charges against people accused of crimes. "When you say this, people think I'm nuts. People think that, oh these black guys or these black politicians, they're just coddling to criminals and they don't see the other side of the issue or the story about them being pre-trial detainees. They don't see the grandmothers out there struggling, what bills should they pay. 'Should I pay my taxes or should I accept this phone call?'" says Brookins.

Brookins says he's seen his constituents struggling to cobble together money for legal bills and fees, having bake sales and fundraisers and asking the pastor for help.

And he articulates something I hear a lot too, and that is that people in African American communities think they're being locked up so that someone somewhere can turn a profit. I didn't believe the county made money off the phones until I had the contract in my hand. But everyone who's done time in county jail just knows the county's making money off those calls. It's a short jump from there to the false conclusion that the county incarcerates people simply to make money. Brookins doesn't think that cynicism comes out of nowhere. He points out that local politicians always fight against closing prisons in their districts because of money, because of the jobs prisons provide. And he says those same politicians pass mandatory minimum sentences that ensure convicts spend a long time in prison and that helps to keep the prisons full. "It can only be said that a lot of what goes on there is not about rehabilitation, it's not about stopping the behavior, but it's about money," says Brookins.

On Thursday we'll take another look at how profiting from incarceration undermines the credibility of the whole criminal justice system, but on Wednesday we're going to zero in on just one part of that: on the county's phone contract with Securus Technologies.

We'll see what county officials have to say about it and we'll ask why Securus charges \$15 for some of the phone calls made from jail.