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Comments of

the Prison Policy Initiative

OPPOSING CHANGES THAT WOULD ELIMINATE IN-PERSON VISITATION

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The Prison Policy Initiative is a nationally-focused non-profit based in Easthampton, Massachusetts that is deeply concerned about the proposed revisions to Maine's DOC policies concerning visitation. In-person visits are the only way incarcerated people get to see their loved ones face-to-face; their importance cannot be overstated. Those incarcerated people who receive in-person visits are less likely to recidivate after they are released¹ and less likely to have disciplinary issues while in a correctional facility². Ensuring that people can maintain connections to the outside world is both humane and cost effective, eliminating these visits would be bad policy.

Since the release of our national report on video visitation, *Screening Out Family Time: The for-profit video visitation industry in prisons and jails*³, a national consensus has formed, recognizing that replacing in-person visits with glitchy video calling is a major step in the wrong direction⁴. Although providing video calling services can act as a powerful supplement to in-person visits when families live far away from jails, *forcing* families to either travel to correctional facilities to use on-site video screens, or pay to video chat with their incarcerated loved ones from afar, both trivializes the importance of these relationships and exploits captive consumers.

¹ Minnesota Department of Corrections. (2011). The Effects of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Department of Corrections. Retrieved from: https://mn.gov/doc/assets/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy_tcm1089-272781.pdf

² Cochran, Joshua C. "The ties that bind or the ties that break: Examining the relationship between visitation and prisoner misconduct." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 40.5 (2012): 433-440. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Joshua_Cochran/publication/256919807_The_ties_that_bind_or_the_ties_that_break_Examining_the_relationship_between_visitation_and_prisoner_misconduct/links/0a85e53652b8c4cdda000000.pdf

³ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/visitation/>

⁴ See attached exhibits

Innocent children will bear the brunt of this change. Roughly 20,000 children in Maine report having had an incarcerated parent at some point during their childhood⁵. Prohibiting children from seeing their parents in person can have a range of negative effects on educational outcomes, peer relationships, and future criminal justice system contact⁶. In other words, there are multiple long-term costs that would result from eliminating in-person visits. Video calls, whether on-site or remote, fail to provide the intimate time with parents that kids need.

The DOC, on its own website, states that its mission is to “reduce the likelihood that juvenile and adult offenders will re-offend by providing practices, programs, and services which are evidence based.” Replacing in-person visits with video calling flies in the face of established evidence and punishes the families of incarcerated people who only wish to support their incarcerated loved ones. On behalf of incarcerated people looking to maintain their support systems, and their families, we urge the DOC to maintain in-person visits.



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⁵ <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-asharedsentence-2016.pdf>

⁶ See: <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/family/ministry-basics/faqs-about-children-of-prisoners/#reunited> and also: <http://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents/federal-tools-resources/tip-sheet-prison-staff-volunteers>

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/1O26jOC>

The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

F.C.C. Makes Telephone Calls for Inmates Cheaper

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD OCT. 26, 2015

Families that have been forced to choose between buying household essentials and sharing a phone call with a loved one behind bars have long pleaded with the federal government to end price-gouging by the companies that provide phone service for jail and prison inmates.

The Federal Communications Commission took a preliminary step toward that end two years ago when it limited what those companies could charge for interstate telephone calls. On Thursday, the commission went one step further when it set limits on what the companies can charge on all inmate calls. There's one big task left: to apply similar rules to newer technologies — like email, voice mail and person-to-person video — which are subject to the same kinds of abuses found in the telephone industry.

There's little doubt that inmates who keep in touch with their families have a better chance of finding places in their communities and staying out of jail once they are released. But before the F.C.C. intervened, a call from behind prison walls could sometimes cost as much as \$14 per minute. Thursday's order sets a cap of 11 cents per minute for all local and long-distance calls from state and federal prisons.

This means an average (and much more affordable) rate of no more than \$1.65 per 15 minutes for a vast majority of intrastate and interstate calls.

Prisoners' families, who pay for these calls, are among the poorest in the country. The new system will allow them to keep in touch without going broke. But the F.C.C. ruling does not get to a fundamental problem: Inmate telephone costs are partly driven by a "commission" — essentially a legal kickback — that phone companies pay corrections departments. The commissions are calculated as a percentage of revenue, or a fixed upfront fee, or a combination of both.

Several members of Congress recently sent a letter to the F.C.C. urging it to ban the commissions. It is unclear whether this is within the agency's power, which means congressional action might be needed. But the members were right when they said that the exploitation of inmates is clearly a human rights issue.

The F.C.C. is now seeking public comment on whether similar caps should be placed on new technologies. These include for-profit video systems like those that allow families and inmates to communicate using personal computers outside the prison and video terminals inside the prison. The answer should be yes.

A report this year by the Prison Policy Initiative, a Massachusetts research and advocacy group, found that jails and private companies were conspiring to shut down traditional face-to-face visits in order to force families to use the computers. This is the same kind of perverse incentive that led to price gouging in traditional telephone services.

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A version of this editorial appears in print on October 26, 2015, on Page A20 of the New York edition with the headline: For Inmates, the Cost of Keeping in Touch.

Videoconferencing is no replacement for in-person visits for jail inmates - Maine news, sports, obituaries, weather - Bangor Daily News

Allowing Maine jail inmates to interact with their families via video conferencing can be a great benefit. Using videos in place of in-person visits, however, is detrimental.

Maine's county jails are [increasingly turning to video visitation](#) to save money and reduce the smuggling of contraband, according to jail officials. In York County and at the [Two Bridges Regional Jail](#) in Wiscasset, video visitation has completely replaced face-to-face visits.

Jail officials might celebrate nominal savings in the short term, but they might find the move counterproductive in the long run.

Maine lawmakers, corrections officials and jail administrators must ensure that video visitation doesn't become a replacement for face-to-face visitors, but instead is used to enhance communications and contact between inmates and their families.

Almost every inmate in the state's jails will one day, perhaps soon, be released and go back to living in their communities. Whether they have support from family and friends is a major predictor of whether they will improve their lives or return to jail. Research shows that one of the best ways to maintain needed support and connections is to allow inmates to remain in close contact with their families, including through in-person visits.

“Family contact is one of the surest ways to reduce the likelihood that an individual will reoffend after release,” a [report](#) from the Prison Policy Initiative concluded.

“When [prisoners] have that contact with the outside family, they actually behave better here at the facility,” said an Indiana prison official quoted in the report.

More contact is clearly better, and video visitation is better than no contact at all, the report notes. But video visits have their drawbacks, the report noted, including the reality that a video visit just isn’t the same as personal contact, that it can be expensive and that the use of video visitation often means the end of traditional visits at a correctional facility.

The Somerset County Jail is using video conferencing not to replace in-person visits, but to ensure its inmates can easily communicate with family members, without them having to leave home. For example, some inmates read bedtime stories to their children through the technology, Capt. Sean McGuire told Maine Public. Nearly a third of the jail’s inmates are from other counties, making it difficult for some family members to visit.

Families are charged 25 cents a minutes — down from \$1 a minute — for the service, which is provided by a national jail video provider, Securus Technologies.

Other Maine jails, however, are using in-house video terminals to replace in-person visits. Jail administrators say this saves money on staff time that is no longer needed to oversee in-person visits and cuts down on the amount of contraband smuggled into jails.

A [review in Texas](#) found that after video visitation replaced in-person visits, the amount of contraband in the Travis County Jail increased, as did

disciplinary problems and inmate violence.

Last year, the Texas Legislature [passed a bill](#) requiring county jails to offer inmates two 20-minute in-person visits per month. The bill took effect even though Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, [did not sign](#) the bill.

“I just think there’s something inherently wrong with not allowing a father to see his family or a mother to talk to her husband or son,” John Whitmire, a Houston Democrat, who sponsored the Senate version of the bill, [told](#) the San Antonio Express-News. “How do you keep an individual from seeing his family? As another human, how do you do that?”

Maine should follow Texas’ lead and ensure that jails maintain in-person visits, for the benefit of prisoners and their families, and, ultimately, the state.

D.C. prisoners deserve better than flawed video-only visitation policy

By **Editorial Board** August 12, 2013

LAST YEAR the District's Department of Corrections replaced in-person visits to the D.C. jail with a video-only visitation policy. Although it was couched as a means of improving the convenience of the visiting process and increasing the frequency of visits, the policy, as we've said before, was ultimately a regrettable decision whose only real effect has been to punish prisoners and families.

In the 11 months since its implementation, the allegedly convenient video visitation policy has not, as critics have pointed out, been expanded to the promised seven days per week; family and friends still have to fit their visits into the old eight-hour, five-day-per-week time frame. Visitors complain of poor quality on the jail's monitors, and some have even experienced cancellations of scheduled appointments because of slightly late arrivals. While it's true that prisoners are technically allowed more visits than they were before — two 45-minute sessions rather than one per week — the system isn't working as it should.

Of course, the problems with video visitation are more than logistical. If prisons are to function as correctional facilities, there's next to no evidence that video visitation provides the human encouragement and maintenance of family ties of in-person contact. The Minnesota Department of Corrections concluded that offenders who were visited in prison were 13 percent less likely to receive another felony conviction and 25 percent less likely to be re-incarcerated for violating parole. Given that about half of the District's 8,000 prisoners released each year end up in prison within three years of their release, it's unclear why the jail would turn its back on a visitation policy with documented potential to assist in rehabilitation.

The D.C. Council is considering a measure that would improve the situation. The Video Visitation Modification Act would essentially maintain the basic structure of video visitation instituted last summer but would also allow for in-person visits at a marginal cost of just about \$600,000 to the District, which ended the last fiscal year with upwards of \$400 million in budget surplus.

After the Baltimore jail scandal in April, where guards colluded with a gang of prisoners to facilitate contraband transactions, critics of the District's proposed measure have understandably cited security as a major concern. However, there's little evidence that in-person visits are the direct cause of inmate-on-guard assaults. While stopping the flow of contraband is a key

concern, so is treating prisoners as humanely and compassionately as possible. There's no reason why the former should rule out the latter.

Read more on this topic:

[The Post's View: Virtual visits for inmates?](#)

[The Post's View: Troubling trend of suicides in D.C. jail](#)

[The Post's View: D.C. jail death of Paul Mannina raises many questions](#)

Sheriff Hodgson strikes again

August 05, 2017



BOSTON GLOBE PHOTO

Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson inspects a 7x 10 foot cell in the Bristol County House of Correction.

Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson has hit on a new idea to mistreat the inmates he's been elected to rehabilitate: [deprive them of in-person family visits.](#)

If that seems too cruel to be true, take note that this is the same sheriff who infamously volunteered his prisoners as free labor to build President Trump's mythical border wall. But Hodgson's latest volley against prisoner rights is not merely an act of empty political showmanship. He's nearly finished

installing the video equipment that would replace in-person family visits for about 900 of the 1,500 inmates under his control. It gets worse: Ultimately, the plan is to charge families for a video connection to see and speak with their incarcerated loved ones.

Already many groups, including the ACLU of Massachusetts and the Prison Policy Initiative, are protesting the video-calls plan. Substituting video for in-person visits is not only inhumane; it's also a bad policy that has backfired at jails across the country.

[Research shows](#) that banning in-person visitation increases recidivism. [A 2014 report in Texas](#) found that smuggling and disciplinary cases actually increased in Travis County when Skype-like calls were implemented. Shortly after, the Texas legislature passed a law allowing video calls in jails only to supplement in-person visits. In January, Massachusetts lawmakers introduced two bills that would prevent substituting in-person visitation with any electronic form of communication for inmate visits.

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Hodgson claims the move is rooted in safety concerns and cost-saving. At Bristol County jails, visitors are separated by clear plexiglass from inmates, and must use a phone to talk. The sheriff has said drug and gun smuggling have been a problem during these visits. If that's the case — and it's unclear how the contraband got through plexiglass — better searches seem like a more sensible solution. Hodgson, who signed a contract with Texas-based Securus for the video-call system, [told WCVB](#) he will save between \$30,000 to \$60,000 a year with the new policy.

Under the plan, video-conferencing with inmates on-site will be free for their

relatives, but a remote option will not. If families want to connect using a webcam at home, they will have to pay anywhere from \$5 to \$20 for a 15-minute video call — with the sheriff's office taking a commission. “This is the picture the sheriff has in mind: I will save money by not having as many guards, while I earn some money off the backs of poor families,” said Jim Pingeon, director of litigation at the nonprofit Prison Legal Services.

But Bristol County, and the Commonwealth, should take the hint from the states that have tried such a short-sighted strategy. In-person family visits should be encouraged at Massachusetts prisons — not replaced with such a poor substitute.

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, Jan. 23](#)), 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.

EDITORIAL

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.

Editorial: A price too high for calls from jail

Nov 2014

Cinderblock walls, thick iron bars and an uncomfortable bed. Nothing says low-tech like a jailhouse.

Until recently, one of the few hints of modern technology was the addition of pay phone systems to facilitate contact between inmates and relatives on the outside. It didn't take long before county jails realized they could generate extra income by charging high fees to prisoners for telephone access. Dallas County now wants to add a video pay phone system, a potential convenience for prisoners whose relatives cannot visit, and also a big potential money maker for the county and contractor.

Since January, county commissioners have debated a proposal by Securus Technologies to install a video-call system in the county jail. We urge them to carefully weigh the pros and cons of this proposal and modifications offered by County Judge Clay Jenkins that will come up in the commissioners' meeting Tuesday.

Jenkins warns that contractors like Securus have a dubious track record. Wherever they've installed such video systems, he says, rules quickly follow to ban face-to-face jailhouse visits and to require all visitations to be done over income-generating video links. Indeed, commissioners rejected a proposal in September that would have eliminated in-person jail visits, and it's not part of Tuesday's proposal.

Some service providers have found a loophole, persuading jail operators to require those visiting in person to use a video link at the visitation facility. It's

critical that commissioners not agree to any plan that would halt face-to-face visitations. The county should not be in the business of exploiting prisoners and their families to balance the budget.

Securus' original proposal offered video phone calls to inmates at \$10 per 20 minutes of usage, plus a per-call "transaction fee" of \$4.95. County commissioners rejected that deal in September. Jenkins plans to seek a compromise deal lowering the rate to \$8 per 20 minutes, with a transaction fee of \$3.

Jenkins' proposal would allow the county and Securus to recoup their investment in the first year of operation, but the fee structure would decline significantly in future years to curtail profiteering.

This newspaper has no problem with businesses making a profit off their services. However, we share Jenkins' concerns, not just about high charges but also the gross unfairness of imposing hefty fees on those least able to afford them: the poor who dominate the inmate population.

Studies, such as one by the Minnesota Department of Corrections in 2011, show that visitations are key to reducing recidivism. They help maintain the socialization and support networks that motivate prisoners toward rehabilitation. When visitations are curtailed, recidivism increases, the study says.

The idea should be to facilitate visitations rather than making them harder and more expensive. We hope Jenkins' compromise plan hits closer to that target.

VIDEOPHONE COMPROMISE

County Judge Clay Jenkins plans to introduce a compromise Tuesday calling

for:

- \$8 per 20-minute call, reduced from earlier \$10 proposal
- \$3 transaction fee, reduced from \$4.95 proposal
- Allowing county and Securus to recoup investment in first year of operation, curtail fees in subsequent years.

In-person visitation should be an option at Travis, Bastrop jails

Posted: 7:00 p.m. Thursday, November 13, 2014

For many inmates in county jails awaiting trial, the days are long, lonely and stressful. For them, visiting with family is their only connection to the outside world. It is a connection that deserves as much protection as the right to private counsel. It is an act that needs to be safeguarded by those operating the jails.

And yet, the trend to do away with in-person visitation in order to make money for local county lock-ups has become all too popular. It is a movement that gives this board pause. It is a trend that needs to cease in Central Texas.

Many county jail inmates have not been convicted of a crime and do not have the resources to make bail before trial. While some who enter these local jails only stay a few days or weeks, many remain behind bars for months at a time. While inmates wait to appear before a judge, these individuals deserve to communicate with loved ones. Their families should not have to carry the burden of high fees intended as revenue for the county.

Last year the Travis County Jail completely did away with in-person inmate visitation. Instead, it now uses a video visitation system similar to Skype provided by Dallas-based Securus Technologies that costs families \$1 a minute to communicate with an inmate. That financial burden, we remind leaders, unfairly affects the largest population of incarcerated: the poor.

Earlier this week, Bastrop County Jail followed with a similar system.

We ask both Travis and Bastrop county officials to reestablish face-to-face

visitation in their jails. Reliance on the video system alone is more problematic than helpful.

Just last month, inmate advocates in Austin called on sheriff's officials to restore in-person visitation at Travis County jails, saying the video chatting system is costly for prisoners and their families and has not improved security as promoted. The advocates pointed to a recent study by the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition and Grassroots Leadership that showed overall increase in disciplinary infractions, assaults and contraband between May 2012 and April 2014 in the county jail. Advocates say the results indicate conditions have worsened for prisoners. The findings are contrary to what the sheriff's office said would happen when it introduced the video system in May 2013. At the time, the sheriff's office said the new system would be safer for inmates.

If the safety of inmates is not enough, other advocates also are concerned about the possibility that attorney-client conversations are being illegally recorded. In April, Securus and the top law enforcement agencies in Travis County were sued over reported recorded conversations between defense lawyers and inmates, communications protected under the Constitution. Advocates say the recordings were turned over to prosecutors.

Travis and Bastrop counties would do better if they instead emulate Dallas County's jail visitation system, which this week added video to available options which include pay phone and face-to-face visitation. Earlier this fall, Dallas commissioners rejected a plan that would have ended face-to-face visitation. Adopting a similar hybrid system in Travis and Bastrop counties would respect the rights of inmates and still produce revenue for the county.

In Travis County, the jail keeps 23 percent, or \$4.60 of every 20 minute, \$20 conversation logged using the video system. Bastrop's jail will get a 20

percent cut of their deal. Each system stands to make a lot of money for both counties. With their phone visitation alone, Dallas County reportedly received \$2.8 million in commissions through their contract with Securus. Travis County was unable to provide totals for the revenue it has received from the agreement.

In-person visitation has a public benefit. A 2011 Minnesota Department of Corrections study shows that visits from family and clergy reduce recidivism. These visits “can significantly improve the transition offenders make from the institution to the community.” A single visit can lower the risk of a person to re-offend by 13 percent. When visitations are reduced or eliminated, recidivism increases, according to study.

Benefits to public and inmate safety, supports for fragile families and adherence to the Constitution are all important parts of the corrections equation. Travis and Bastrop counties should correct that balance.

http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/opinion/editorials/video-jail-visits-technology-has-advantages-but-keep-the-in/article_fc6ddd0b-b42d-5c3e-85d4-159038d9c097.html

Video jail visits / Technology has advantages, but keep the in-person option

Jun 4, 2015



More jails adopting video visits pioneered in Cape May

Digital technology that has changed so much is going to jail - not to be punished, but to bring the same ambivalent "progress" it has brought to many industries and personal life.

Jails and prisons across New Jersey are adopting video visitation for family members and friends. That's a good option, but inadequate as their only access.

At the Cape May County jail, a pioneer of video visits starting in 2011, visitors sit at one of three video terminals and chat with the live image of the inmate inside.

The county charges the inmates or their visitors \$10 for 20 minutes of such video chat, and pockets half of that. The county's sheriff, Gary Schaffer, says video visitation makes security easier for his staff, since the inmates don't need to be moved from within the secured part of the jail. He said video visits are responsible for reducing assaults on jail officers from nearly 30 a year to almost none.

For these reasons, apparently, Cape May County has eliminated the ability of families, friends and others to visit an inmate in person. All "visits" are limited to seeing each other on a computer screen.

Other institutions have adopted video visits as an option, giving visitors and inmates the choice of video chat or actually seeing each other.

Warden Robert Balicki, whose Cumberland County jail offers both visitation methods, has seen the benefits. "I think you should still have in-person visits," he told The Press recently. "The video visit is not the same. You can give them a hug before the visit and after the visit."

As video visitation has spread to more than 500 prisons and jails in 43 states, complaints have grown from families who say prohibiting seeing an inmate in person weakens bonds that need to be maintained - especially with young children.

The U.S. Department of Justice is starting to address the shift in visitation. Its National Institute of Corrections issued a report in December urging jails and prisons considering video visitation to "consider the proven benefits of traditional visiting, the limitations of video visiting, the needs of each facility, the goals of the correctional administration, and the laws, regulations and political realities of the region. Video visiting cannot replicate seeing someone in-person, and it is critical for a young child to visit his or her incarcerated parent in person to establish a secure attachment."

In his preface to that report, institute acting Director Robert M. Brown Jr. said correctional facilities should "introduce video visiting as a resource, ideally in concert with in-person visitation."

This newspaper agrees with the developing federal view that video visitation makes a good addition to the ways inmates can stay connected with the world to which they'll return, but only as another option. Families, friends and attorneys must have the ability to see an inmate in person for communication that is unimpeded by technology. That's not only fair to the people involved, but serves the important societal interest in the rehabilitation of inmates.

Given that limiting families and inmates to only teleconferences might be more convenient, safer and even money-making for correctional institutions, this decision can't be left to local officials. We urge New Jersey legislators to enact a law ensuring visitors will continue to have the ability to see inmates in person.

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Video prison visits – done right

YDR editorial board Published 9:18 a.m. ET Jan. 29, 2016

York County Prison officials could learn from Westmoreland's mistakes and institute a less costly video visitation system.



(Photo: File)

When Westmoreland County installed computers last year to allow for video visitations for its prison inmates, the county had good intentions.

Or seemingly good intentions.

The notion, which seems on its face to be a good idea, is an example of good intentions gone awry for a variety of reasons.

The county last January installed a system that allows prisoners to visit via video with loved ones.

That in and of itself is a good idea, increasing and expanding options for families of prisoners for visits and bringing the prison into the 21st century.

It's good for families, and it helps those who find themselves locked up cope with being in jail. The law-abiding may not care about that, but it is in the prison's interest, for the sake of maintaining peace behind bars, that inmates are well-behaved and have incentive to stay that way.

It also increases security at the prison by reducing the traffic in and out of the jail, and it reduces the risk of visitors trying to smuggle contraband into the prison.

It would seem like something the York County Prison could look into.

But if York County does decide to follow Westmoreland County's lead, it should make some changes.

Westmoreland County Sheriff John Held cited the security benefits of the system, but the county commissioners had a slightly different view. They were seeking to increase revenue with the video visits, charging \$15 a visit.

That seems like a bad idea, charging families to visit loved ones in lockup. It's almost Dickensian in its cruelty to families seeking to stay connected to loved ones who run afoul of the law.

And it hasn't produced the kind of windfall the commissioners expected. The county earned \$14,000 from the visits. It had projected revenue of \$100,000.

The shortfall can be attributed to a number of things. [TribLive.com reported \(http://triblive.com/news/westmoreland/9859739-74/video-county-prison\)](http://triblive.com/news/westmoreland/9859739-74/video-county-prison) that many family members on the outside lacked access to computers and the secure, high-speed Internet connection necessary to complete the visits.

It could also be attributed to the county's seemingly draconian limits on visits. Before the video system was installed, inmates were allowed three half-hour-long visits with up to three people at a time a week. Inmates are now allowed one in-person visit a week and two 25-minute video visits.

ADVERTISING

TribLive.com quoted relatives of inmates saying it didn't seem fair to cut the in-person visits and to charge a fee for the video visits.

So the revenue was minuscule, compared to what the county expected. And it needed to make the cash. It had paid \$92,000 to a software company to install computers and web cams in the jail, and it hoped at least to make that money back.

That cost seems exorbitant. A few computers and web cams shouldn't cost that much. And hiring a company from Minnesota to do the work seems unnecessary. Couldn't the county's IT guys have done the job, running to Best Buy for equipment?

But we're thinking that York County Prison officials could learn from Westmoreland's mistakes and institute a less costly video visitation system.

Such a system could increase connections between inmates and families, helping foster their rehabilitation.

Consider using existing county IT workers to set up the system.

Don't look at it as a revenue source. Yes, inmates and families would have to be charged for the service – but not an exorbitant \$15 per video session fee.

Don't limit in-person visits. Allow families to make the decision whether to participate in the program without losing any visitation rights.

The lesson is that other counties can learn from Westmoreland County's errors.

And make sure that good intentions remain good.

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