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Crime, Law And Justice

3:11 PM MON JUNE 3, 2013

Inmates' Families Say They're The Ones Punished By Switch To Video Visits

By [JESSICA ROBINSON](#) (/PEOPLE/JESSICA-ROBINSON)

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5:24

Even if you've never visited a jail, you probably have a pretty clear image of what inmate visitation is like – a shatterproof glass barrier, two people sitting on either side, speaking into telephones.



http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/northwestnews/files/201306/060113JR_VirtualVisits.jpg

But that's changing in some parts of the Northwest. More and more county jails are switching to privately operated video conferencing systems. Sort of like Skype, for inmates. But these systems have technical difficulties and come with costs for the inmates' families.

http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/northwestnews/files/201306/060113JR_VirtualVisits.jpg

Credit Jessica Robinson / Northwest News Network
Jennifer Lopez, 30, of Pocatello, Idaho, says a video system that has replaced in-person visits at the Bannock County jail is hard to navigate and often has technical problems.

Delayed visits

James Weimer is at his wit's end. He's standing at an automated kiosk in the lobby of the Bannock County jail in southern Idaho. And he can't figure out how to log into the video visitation system.

Weimer is trying to set up a visit with his granddaughter. Luckily, a technician from the company that runs the video system happens to be in the building. But even with his help, things aren't going well.

They work on it for 20 minutes.

"There's a lot of problems," says Weimer. "I've seen a lot of people in here. Very frustrated."

Jails across the Northwest – from Lincoln County, Oregon, to Benton County, Washington, to Ada County, Idaho – now offer some form of video visitation. A new jail known as The Score in King County was built in 2011 with [only video in mind](#) (<http://www.scorejail.org/visiting-score-inmates/>). No in-person visits at all.

'It was very labor intensive'

To corrections agencies, swapping out plexiglass for computer monitors is a safer and less expensive route.

Darren Wallace is the vice president of business development for Telmate, a company based in Ontario, Ore., that's becoming a major player in the video visitation business. It's installed systems at 29 correctional facilities across in the region, including here in Idaho's Bannock County.

"Historically, this whole lobby would be full right now on a first-come-first-serve basis, so it was very labor intensive for the staff at the desk," Wallace explains. "Additionally, you have inmates who cannot be in the same room at the same time, so that's difficult to manage."

Wallace says the technology just takes some getting used to. Last year, Telmate installed the first statewide system in Oregon's prisons. Since then, he points out, people from opposite corners of the state, and even other countries, have successfully made more than 3,000 online video calls with Oregon prisoners.

Currently, video is an added option in Oregon. Inmates can still meet with their families in person too. What worries inmate advocates is the trend toward video visits only -- and in some cases charging families for the visit. Studies show inmates who maintain personal connections to the outside world are less likely to re-offend, and corrections experts don't know yet whether those interactions are as effective on a computer screen.

Against the grain

And there is another problem.

"The video's very grainy," says Jennifer Lopez of Pocatello, Idaho. "With all the technology today on smartphones and everything it's all clear, it's HD. [This is] like slow moving, there's kind of delays and it's not like you're right there -- I mean I'm in the same building as them, I don't see why I shouldn't be able to see them."

In her early 20s, Lopez was busted for meth. She says the support she got from her family while she was in jail laid the groundwork for her to get clean and stay clean. She's going on eight years now. Lopez is trying to do the same for Robbie, a 19-year-old friend of the family who recently landed in jail for fighting and eluding the cops.

But Lopez says half of her visits haven't worked out because of technical problems. On top of that, Telmate tacks on all kinds of charges. For example, Lopez says she paid an \$8 fee to put \$25 on Robbie's account.

"I want to be there to give him that support but with this new Telmate system it makes it really hard to support your loved one," says Lopez. "Whether it's money-wise, communication-wise. Because they nickel and dime you on everything, every little aspect. And it's supposed to make things simpler, but it doesn't."

Lopez says those charges are especially hard on poor families like hers.

But sheriffs associations -- including the ones in Oregon and Idaho -- argue revenue from telecommunications helps offset the high cost to taxpayers of housing inmates. Bannock County, for example, has made \$26,290 since October through what are known as commissions from Telmate.

This is part of what Portland lawyer Stephen Raheer calls the "perverse" relationship between the corrections system and telecom companies. He says the commissions

create an incentive for counties to negotiate higher costs -- which the inmates' families have to pay.

Raher says whether it's phones or video, these are symptoms of the same problem. "When you think about it, most companies, the incentive to provide good customer service is the danger that unhappy customers will take their business elsewhere. That is not really an issue in the inmate communications services industry because customers don't have that option."

The FCC is now considering regulating the rates for phones in jails and prisons.

Meanwhile James Weimer and his wife Glenda, did eventually get to visit their granddaughter at the Bannock County jail.

They sit in a cinderblock booth and wait for the computer monitor to blink on and show their granddaughter Kayla.

Kayla is just a couple of days into a drug treatment program. She cries a little as she talks to her grandparents. Other inmates can be seen in the common area behind her.

Glenda Weimer asks, "Are you having fun yet?"

Kayla's grandmother listens and tells her they'll see each other again very soon.

Correction: We erroneously stated the revenue that Bannock County has made through commissions from Telmate. The correct amount is \$26,290.

On the Web:

[Telmate.com \(http://www.telmate.com/\)](http://www.telmate.com/) - official site

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The Post's View

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

By Editorial Board, Published: August 12

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.

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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,

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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.

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Inmates' Families Say They're The Ones Punished By Switch To Video Visits



June 3, 2013, 4:45 pm

By Jessica Robinson

Even if you've never visited a jail, you probably have a pretty clear image of what inmate visitation is like – a shatterproof glass barrier, two people sitting on either side, speaking into telephones. But that's changing in some parts of the Northwest. More and more county jails are switching to privately operated video conferencing systems. Sort of like Skype, for inmates. But these systems have technical difficulties and come with costs for the inmates' families.

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James Weimer: "It don't work very well, I'll tell ya."

Weimer is trying to set up a visit with his granddaughter. Luckily, a technician from the company that runs the video system happens to be in the building. But even with his help, things aren't going well.

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This is Jennifer Lopez of Pocatello, Idaho.

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This is part of what Portland lawyer Stephen Raher calls the "perverse" relationship between the corrections system and telecom companies. He says the commissions create an incentive for counties to negotiate higher costs -- which the inmates' families have to pay.

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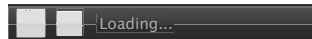
Glenda Weimer: "There she is!"

James Weimer: "Hi! ... Nothing, we thought we'd come visit you."

Kayla is just a couple of days into a drug treatment program. She cries a little as she talks to her grandparents. Other inmates can be seen in the common area behind her.

Glenda Weimer: "Are you having fun yet?"

Kayla's grandmother listens and tells her they'll see each other again very soon.



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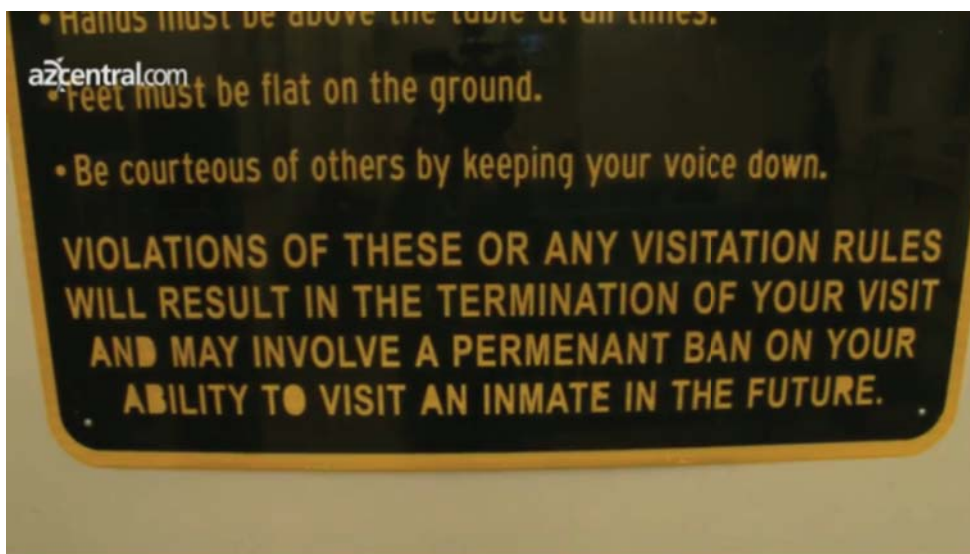
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MCSO to allow video jail visits – for a price



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By JJ Hensley
The Republic | azcentral.com
Tue Dec 10, 2013 10:58 PM

Maricopa County jails are installing a new video system that will allow inmates to have virtual visits with family, while earning the county Sheriff's Office hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, but make it harder for some relatives to see loved ones.

The high-tech system, which will be the largest of its kind in the country, according to the manufacturer, will let family and friends anywhere in

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the world talk with inmates via video, so long as they have access to a computer with a camera and a credit card to pay \$12.95 for a 20-minute conversation.

The system, which is expected to be in place early next summer, is meant to make visits easier and improve security at the county jails, which book 100,000 people every year. But as work begins on installing the Internet-based system, the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office cut regular visiting time from three hours per week to 30 minutes.

Although sheriff's officials say the system will make visiting inmates easier, it's not being welcomed by prisoner-rights advocates. The

American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona criticized MCSO for planning to eliminate face-to-face visits at its Towers, Estrella and Durango jails because it could mean fewer people have access to inmates.

Visitors to the county's other three jails communicate with inmates through closed-circuit video accessible at terminals inside jail lobbies.

ACLU senior staff attorney Kelly Flood said the need for people to have access to a video-enabled computer to visit with an inmate would make it harder for some families and prevent people like Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who eschews technology and relies on a typewriter, from having a virtual visit with an inmate in his jails.

The vast majority of jail inmates have not been sentenced for their crimes, she said, and many remain in custody because their friends and family members cannot afford to bail them out.

"They're making it harder and harder. It seems particularly unjust and unfortunate when we're talking about pre-sentence detainees," Flood said. "For those folks to be completely deprived of their families' visitation, it's unjust and unfortunate and dehumanizing."

The \$2.6 million system, which the manufacturer is installing at no cost to Maricopa County, will also turn into a money maker for the Sheriff's Office once it gets paid off and the agency starts to receive a 10 percent cut of the fee paid for every conversation.

The sheriff's share, which would average more than \$300,000 each year if the agency maintained its current visitation rate, is designated to go into the Inmate Services Fund, a pool earmarked for drug-rehabilitation programs and other services for inmates.

The Sheriff's Office has come under scrutiny in the past for using the inmate funds, which topped \$12 million in fiscal 2012, to pay for deputies who didn't work in the jails, a violation of county policy.

State leaders have also swept those funds in the past to help balance the budget.

Both the Sheriff's Office and the system's manufacturer expect jail visits to increase once the system is in place, because friends and family will have virtually unlimited access to inmates from anywhere with a reliable Internet connection.

"You can use this system in China, Russia, on the moon, wherever they have an Internet system, including airplanes," Arpaio said.

Other agencies in Arizona that have converted to video-visitation systems have seen an increase in visitors after inmates' friends and family members became familiar with navigating the software and comfortable with paying a fee for each visit.

Pinal County opened its video-visitation system in April, and inmates have received more than 15,000 video visits in the first eight months. The agency still allows on-site visits and averages slightly more than 1,500 each month.

Apache County used the same company installing Maricopa County's system and launched video visitation about six weeks ago. The jails have seen an increase in visitation, in addition to providing an opportunity for out-of-state inmates who were arrested for motor-vehicle violations on Interstate 40 to see family members from their home states and countries, Apache County sheriff's Cmdr. Michael Cirivello said.

The system has allowed the jail to expand visiting hours from one day per week, with a maximum of 30 minutes, to five days a week with inmates receiving as many visits as their friends and relatives are willing to pay for, he said.

Apache County, which stretches 200 miles, also has inmates whose relatives find it cheaper to pay the \$20 fee for a 20-minute video conversation than to drive to the facility in St. Johns, Cirivello said.

"I had one guy in here who got a visit from Okinawa (Japan)," he said. "And the people that get visited a lot, they're getting visits every day now, sometimes a couple times a day."

Three of the six Maricopa County jail facilities have used video systems for several years that allow visitors to meet with inmates through kiosks set up in the jail lobby and mobile units that detention officers move around to inmates' cells. The other three jails still offer face-to-face visits, but the visiting hours were reduced systemwide in an attempt to be fair, sheriff's Deputy Chief Mike Olson said.

Once the new system is installed, visitors will have to register through Securus Technologies' website and

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wait for sheriff's investigators to conduct a background check to ensure the visitors are not felons.

After the visitor is approved, he or she can schedule a visit with an inmate 24 hours in advance and engage in the virtual visitation from any computer with a camera.

The virtual visitation system will present some hurdles for detention officers intent on keeping felons from visiting inmates, which is possible if a non-felon registers for a visit and a felon sits down in his place, but sheriff's officials said visitors would be barred if they were discovered attempting to game the system.

A Securus representative said he hoped the prospects of easy virtual visitation would dissuade criminals from engaging in any illicit activity.

"We believe \$12.95 and their visitation rights to visit in the future are on the line, and they're not going to game the system," said Darrin Hays, a Securus account manager. "We believe they're going to say, 'There's value in this, and we just want to get our visits.' "

But the advent of virtual visitation also means the Sheriff's Office will likely have to abandon its long-standing and highly promoted policy that prohibits undocumented immigrants from visiting inmates in Maricopa County jails.

As the system is accessible from anywhere in the world, Hays said, the visitor's residency status in the United States or any other country should become irrelevant.

"What this really does is promote the relationship with the community," Hays said. "If I'm here illegally, I don't think I want to step into the jail, and famously, Arpaio's jail. So, what can I do? I can actually get online, and I can at least apply. If I'm denied, I'm denied. They can't find me, I'm on an Internet connection.

"You don't know where they're visiting from, so you really can't say they're here illegally."

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Travis County Jail Visitation Is Now Video Visitation

Travis County Jail Visitation Is Now Video Visitation

Beginning May 1, 2013, visitation at the Travis County Jail system will be exclusively video visitation. People will be able to visit their loved ones and schedule those visits from the comfort of their home, office, or anywhere equipped with a computer, camera and high speed internet access. For those who don't have access to a computer, visitation for the entire jail system, Downtown and Del Valle, will still occur at the Travis County Correctional Complex Visitation Center.

The main reason for the switch is safety and security of the inmates and staff. Inmates will no longer need to be transported to the visitation center for visits. Instead they will visit from their units using the video visitation terminals.

Those who take advantage of the on-line video visitation will save time and money by being able to schedule their visit and conduct their visit without driving to the Correctional Complex and waiting in line to see if their loved one can have a visit.

Beginning May 1, 2013, anyone can go to www.Securustech.net/VideoVisitation to schedule and reserve the next On-Site or At-Home visit with an inmate at the Travis County Jail.

- By scheduling an On-Site Visitation, you must travel to the Travis County Correctional Complex, in Del Valle, and participate in video visitation using terminals located in the visitation center.
- By scheduling an At-Home Visitation, you can participate in a visitation remotely using a computer, webcam, and high speed internet access. Charges are \$20 for 20 minutes. Getting started is easy!

1) Beginning May 1, 2013, go to www.Securustech.net/VideoVisitation

2) Sign up for At-Home visitation by clicking on "Get Started Now" or schedule an On-Site visit by clicking on "Schedule an On-Site Visitation" 3) Follow the on-screen instructions and complete your registration Detailed instructions can be found by clicking on "How It Works" or "Support" from the www.Securustech.net/VideoVisitation website.

###

Roger Wade Senior Public Information Officer Travis County Sheriff's Office Office 512-854-4986 Pager 512-935-1162

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CONTACT (M-F 8-5)
P.O. Box 1748 Austin, TX 78767
(512) 854-9770 (phone)
(512) 854-9722 (fax)

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