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Video Visits at New Jersey Jails Spark Controversy

Inmates speaking with visitors either remotely or on a computer screen at a facility are increasing, prompting a debate about prisoners' rights



Visitors video chat with inmates at Camden County Jail in New Jersey last month. PHOTO: KEVIN COOK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **CORINNE RAMEY**

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At the Camden County Jail last month, families eagerly arrived for scheduled visits with inmates who were housed upstairs at the New Jersey facility.

These visits, however, didn't take place face-to-face, but via computer screen.

Video visits, in which a family member speaks with an inmate either remotely or on a computer screen at a jail, have increased in New Jersey facilities in the past few years. At least five of the state's 21 counties, largely in the southern part of the state, have systems that allow for video calls to an inmate from a cellphone or computer.

In New Jersey, video visits have prompted a debate about inmate rights and whether counties, some of which earn revenue from the calls, should profit from such arrangements.

Jail officials say the visits promote safety, save staffing costs and allow inmates to receive more visitors. Critics, including inmate advocates and some public officials, contend counties and jails are using inmates' families as a revenue source and decreasing in-person contact. Typically, jails charge visitors for remote visits but not for video visits inside the jail.

"It's not the same as seeing them face to face," said a Camden woman, who was visiting her boyfriend, accompanied by a five-year-old. "It should be free to see your loved one," she added, of remote visits.

Inmates were more positive, although bristled at the cost. Cirino DeGeorge, 47 years old, who is charged with aggravated assault, said inmates get excited about the video visits just like they do about canteen every week. "In here, there's not a lot to look forward to."

Video visitation, which began in the southern U.S. in the '90s, gradually spread to the Mid-Atlantic states, then the Midwest, and more recently, California, said David Henion, senior vice president of national sales at Global Tel*Link, a telecommunications company that provides the technology for several jails in New Jersey. "In the Northeast the reason it held off so long is because contact visitation has been so prevalent," he said.

About 475 jails nationwide use video visitation, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit that seeks to regulate the phone and video industry. A 2015 report by the group found three-quarters of jails eliminated in-person visits, known as contact visits, after adding the technology.

In New Jersey, some jails have replaced contact visits with ones on computer screens, said Karina Wilkinson, an organizer with inmate-advocacy group New Jersey Phone Justice, said: "There's no substitute for face-to-face contact."

The cost of inmate phone calls, which has been controversial in the past, has been regulated by both the Federal Communications Commission and a New Jersey law. For some jails and inmate advocates, video visits are the next frontier in the same fight.

For jails, video visits can cut down on contraband and decrease violence and crowd-control issues, officials said.

The cost for remote video visits—\$10 for 20 minutes—is relatively cheap, if you consider gas and tolls or public transportation, Cape May



Juanya Anderson of Sicklerville, N.J., video chats with her boyfriend, an inmate at the Camden County Jail. PHOTO: KEVIN COOK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

County Sheriff Gary Schaffer said. Of that \$10, \$4.60 contributes to the county's general fund, for a total of about \$14,000 last year, and the remainder goes to the company that provides the technology.

In Camden, which installed a video system last year, fights used to break out among visitors from rival gangs, said County Director of Corrections David Owens, and lines could get very long. The number of monthly visitors dropped from 10,000 in 2015 to about 740 today, he noted.

For remote video visits, Camden charges \$8 for 20 minutes, half of which goes to fund inmate items such as bus passes upon release and hygiene packages. Costs in other counties vary. In Salem, remote visits cost \$12 for 20 minutes. Salem County Correctional Facility Capt. Robert Reilly said initially all revenue went to the company to pay off the system. Last year, the county earned \$14,579 from the calls.

A bill that cleared an Assembly committee in January would cap rates at 11 cents a minute, make in-person visits mandatory and forbid counties from getting a commission for providing the service. Commissions vary, but around 50% is typical.

Assemblyman Gordon Johnson, a Democrat and one of the sponsors of the bill, said his goal is to protect inmates and families from being gouged. "The county is making money now on an inmate," he said. "That's not acceptable."

A Camden spokesman said capping the cost at 11 cents would decrease the jail's ability to fund inmate programming. Sheriff Schaffer said Cape May County couldn't break even at that cost so likely would discontinue its use.

At Camden County's jail last month, visitors entered the facility in shifts, anticipating video visits. "They're horrible," said a 22-year-old Camden resident visiting her boyfriend, with her ponytailed three-

year-old in tow. “The video always cuts in and out.”

Jail officials said for remote visits, visitors should be someplace with good cellphone service or Wi-Fi to maintain video quality.

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