

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Interoffice Memorandum

DATE: May 2, 2012

TO: Supervisor Mark Borkowski, Chairman, Committee on Judiciary, Safety, and General Services

FROM: Jennifer Collins, County Board Research Analyst *jc*

SUBJECT: Staff referral of File No. 12-78, Professional Services Contract with Century Link Correctional Communication Services for the provision of inmate phone services at the County Correctional Facilities

Background

At the March 1, 2012 meeting of the Committee on Judiciary, Safety, and General Services, the committee reviewed a proposal from the Milwaukee County Sheriff requesting authorization to execute a Professional Services Contract with Century Link Correctional Communication Services for the provision of inmate phone services at the county correctional facilities. The committee referred the item to County Board staff, requesting that staff research whether other institutions across the country use “disposable cell phones” and the rates, services, and structure associated with those models.

This report seeks to fulfill the aforementioned request. Please note that given the transition in County Board staff assignments, this referral request was completed under a condensed timeline.

Analysis

Research staff was unable to find any jurisdictions where “disposable cell phones” were used in lieu of the traditional wall mount inmate phone system. A search for companies specializing in disposable cell phones for correctional settings also yielded no results.

What did emerge, however, was significant concern related to the proliferation and use of contraband cell phones by inmates in correctional institutions. Such usage was linked to incidents of victim-witness intimidation, attempted and successful escapes, and death threats. The U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation weighed in on the gravity of this issue, discussing response measures such as increased detection measures, canine searches, and the blocking of cell phone service in institutions.

Further, the Request for Proposal (RFP) for inmate phone providers contained call monitoring requirements, giving the Milwaukee County District Attorney’s office (DA)

the ability to monitor inmate phone communication (outside of inmate calls to legal representation), in order to respond to any possible criminal activity attempted to be conducted from within either correctional facility. The DA sent a separate memo to committee members detailing the importance of this capability.

Due to the inability to find correctional systems utilizing a “disposable cell phone” model, should policymakers be truly interested in pursuing a model similar to this, the county may have to re-issue an RFP containing revised specifications related to a “disposable cell phone” model for correctional facilities. Given the comments from the DA’s Office, County Board staff recommends that any inmate phone RFP contain ample call monitoring capabilities. Prior to pursuing such a model, staff also suggests that a thorough analysis of whether such a system would impact efforts to prevent contraband cell phone use by inmates within the county’s correctional facilities be completed.

Because staff was unable to locate other jurisdictions using this model, a full analysis of rates, and service structure associated with such as system was not possible. However, the GAO recently issued a report to Congress related to both improved cell phone detection, and inmate phone rates at the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP). According to that report:

BOP sets its rates to cover the cost of operating the telephone system and to generate profits, which BOP uses to provide the majority of funding for inmate amenities—the most significant of which are wages for inmate employment and expenses associated with inmate recreational activities. If BOP reduced inmate telephone rates, inmates would benefit from the ability to make less expensive calls. However, lower rates also could result in less revenue, lower profits, and therefore fewer funds available for inmate wages and other amenities, unless BOP recovers these funds through other sources.

The report also contains a chart comparing the cost of a 15-minute call across BOP and selected correctional systems that use revenues to provide inmate amenities. That chart is recreated below.

Correctional System	Local-Direct Dial/Debit	Local-Collect	Long Distance-Direct Dial/Debit	Long Distance-Collect
BOP	\$0.90	\$.95-\$5.70 (varies by State)	\$3.45	\$8.45
Defense-Army	\$3.75	\$6.00	\$3.75	\$6.00
Defense-Navy	\$6.00	\$16.08	\$6.00	\$16.08
Defense-Marines	\$6.00	\$16.08	\$6.00	\$16.08
Maryland Division of Correction	\$0.50	\$0.85	\$4.50	\$7.20
Mississippi Department of Corrections	Not offered	\$2.85	Not offered	\$14.55
New Jersey Department of Corrections	\$4.95	\$4.95	\$4.95	\$4.95
Texas Department of Criminal Justice	\$3.90	\$3.90	\$6.45	\$6.45

By comparison, according to the Sheriff's Department, the current and proposed cost for inmate collect calls is \$5.55; debit card calls are \$3.30. The 2012 Adopted Budget contains \$1.89 million in inmate call revenue.

This report is informational only. Please see County Board Research staff with any additional questions or concerns regarding this report.