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**Draft Plan to restore in-person visitation to
Travis County jail facilities and improve
communications between families and inmates.**

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In-Person Visitation

Why Has In-Person Visitation/Video Visitation Become a “Hot Topic”

In October 2012, the Travis County Commissioners Court voted to allow adding video visitation as a supplemental service in the Travis County Jail. The video visitation service is provided by a company named Securus and is accomplished through a Skype-like monitor. In 2013, the Travis County Sheriff’s Office eliminated in-person visitation from the Travis County Jail.

In an early September 2015 meeting the “Commissioners considered two options – a comprehensive \$1.2 million package that would bring in-person visits to everyone at

Del Valle, and another for those in minimum- and medium-security setups costing about \$300,000 less. The Sheriff's Office recommended the comprehensive package, which the commissioners ultimately rejected on a 4-1 vote."¹ Of concern, is that the County Commissioners indicated that they did not know that there was a video visitation mandate. Additionally, there was conversation surrounding whether Travis County should be exempt from House Bill 549 (see below).

At the end of September, the Travis County Commissioner's Court voted to restore in-person visitation to the Travis County Jail. In a December meeting, the Commissioner's Court stated that they wanted in-person visitation to be restored by April.² At this same meeting, Major West from the Sheriff's Office stated new scheduling software would need to be bought.³ According to Major West, the Sheriff's Office will hire 14 personnel to facilitate in-person visitation.⁴ The new personnel will begin working in January.⁵ Moreover, new facilities may need to be built in the future in order to accommodate a possible increase in in-person visitation.⁶ The Sheriff's office will give the Commissioner's Court another update in February.⁷

House Bill 549

House Bill 549 ("HB 549") was passed by the Texas Legislature in 2015 as a response to concerns that as video visitation became mandatory across counties in Texas, low-income families were encountering financial obstacles.⁸ HB 549 was authored by Representative Eric Johnson (D-Dallas) and requires the Texas Commission on Jail Standards to establish rules and procedures to allow inmates a minimum of two-in-person visitations per week.⁹ However, HB 549 contains a provision that exempts jails that have substantially invested in standing or under construction facilities from complying with the in-person visitation requirement.¹⁰

¹ Chase Hoffberger, *Face-to-Face Will in-person visitation return to Travis County Jail?*, AUSTIN CHRONICLE, Sep. 25, 2015, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2015-09-25/face-to-face/>.

² Audrey McGlinchy, *County Prepares to Reinstate In-Person Jail Visits*, KUT.org, Dec. 2, 2015, <http://kut.org/post/county-prepares-reinstate-person-jail-visits>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Bill Analysis*, SENATE RESEARCH CENTER, May 20, 2015, <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlodocs/84R/analysis/pdf/HB00549E.pdf#navpanes=0>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

In regards, to the exemption, the Austin American-Statesman and Austin Chronicle reported in late September that the Texas Commission on Jail Standards was “re-evaluating its decision to grant the Travis County sheriff’s office an exemption” under HB 549.¹¹ The re-evaluation was a result of “Travis County incurr[ing] ‘zero’ costs for the 2013 [video visitation] expansion.¹² Instead, Securus footed the bill. If Travis County’s exemption is revoked, then the \$1.2 million comprehensive package may not optional.¹³

Evolution of Visitation in Travis County

Before December 2011, in-person visits were offered five days a week in the evenings.¹⁴ In December of 2011, a visitation building was opened at the Del Valle Jail, and in person visits were offered five days a week in the mornings and evenings.¹⁵ In 2004, four video visitation systems were introduced in order for maximum security inmates to visit with family members and attorneys.¹⁶ In 2009, 97 additional video visitation systems were added to allow for on site video visitation.¹⁷ In May 2013, on site video visitation became mandatory.¹⁸ “Currently, the visitation center is open for free video visits from 8 am – 10 pm, Tuesday through Saturday, excluding County Holidays. Additionally, off site video visits are available seven days a week, 8 am – 10 pm, and include opportunities to visit even on holidays. Any inmate not restricted from visits due to disciplinary issues may have visits at any open time.”¹⁹

¹¹ Sean Collins Walsh, *Ruling on county’s video-based jail visits questioned*, AUSTIN CHRONICLE, Sep. 21, 2015, <http://www.mystatesman.com/news/news/local/ruling-on-countys-video-based-jail-visits-question/nnkLN/>; *Face-to-Face Will in-person visitation return to Travis County Jail?*

¹² *Face-to-Face Will in-person visitation return to Travis County Jail?*

¹³ *Face-to-Face Will in-person visitation return to Travis County Jail?*

¹⁴ *Travis County Sheriff’s Office Visitation*, TRAVIS COUNTY, Apr. 23, 2015, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=5&ved=0CDsQFjAEahUKEwjMsJvrgYnHAhWjA0KHcolAeg&url=http%3A%2F%2Ftraviscountytexas.com%2FCitizens%2FFileOpen.aspx%3FType%3D30%26ID%3D28478&ei=HFO9VcyyA4mZNSrLhMAO&usq=AFQjCNHpafKUVBiBl-KwrgwL0JbmHiK7gA&sig2=6ZzQrLyA9aBc44hm3TqeqQ&bvm=bv.99261572,d.eXY&cad=rja>

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

How Does Video Visitation Work?

Video visitation can happen at home. Video visitation from home requires a computer, internet access, and an account with Securus.²⁰ Video visitation from home has the benefit of allowing those that cannot travel, due to a variety of circumstances such as disabilities, to the Travis County Jail to be able to see and talk with their loved ones.

The process of on-site video visitation works similar through in-person visitation except that instead of seeing a loved one behind a glass, you see a loved one through a video monitor that is located in a visitation center. A inmate is allowed two free on-site video visitations per week. Any extra video visitation cost an inmate \$20 for 20 minutes. An attorney is allowed unlimited access to an inmate.

Impacts Of A Mandatory Video Visitation Regime

According to Grassroots Leadership, a local advocacy organization, report there was a correlation between the removal of in-person visitation and an increase in disciplinary infractions.²¹ In this report, disciplinary infractions at the Travis County Jail have increased from 820 in May 2012 to 1,160 in April 2014.²² Indeed, the jail averaged 940 disciplinary infractions before in-person visitation was eliminated and averaged 1,087 disciplinary infractions after the elimination of in-person visitation.²³ Additionally, there was a 20% increase in inmate assaults.²⁴

Further, there are mental health and recidivism benefits to in-person visitation. “A 2011 study by the Minnesota Department of Corrections found that felons who were visited in jail were 13 percent less likely to commit a crime once they were released. The recidivism rate was 25 percent lower for inmates convicted of misdemeanors.”²⁵

Child In-Person Contact Visits

The Travis County Sheriff’s Office provides two programs that allow inmates one in-person contact visits with their children. The two programs are Parents and Children Together (“PACT”) and People Recognizing the Inherent Dignity of Everyone (“PRIDE”). PACT teaches male inmates to “learn their emotional parenting styles and how they affect relationships with their children (including listening and bonding

²⁰ *Frequently Asked Questions*, SECURUS TECHNOLOGIES, no date, <https://securustech.net/frequently-asked-questions>.

²¹ Renaud, Jorge, *More Money, Less Love*, TEXAS CRIMINAL JUSTICE COALITION, no date, <http://grassrootsleadership.org/sites/default/files/Securus%20Video%20Visitation%20Fact%20Sheet%20%7C%20September%202014.pdf>.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Ruling on county’s video-based jail visits questioned.*

tips).”²⁶ PRIDE “assist incarcerated Travis County women [build] strong relationships with their children and families.”²⁷ Only inmates who have not been charged with offenses involving children or family violence are eligible for PACT and PRIDE.²⁸ Once an inmate receives a certificate of completion from PACT or PRIDE, they are eligible for one in-person contact visit with their children.²⁹ These visits take place one time per month.³⁰

According to the Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin³¹, contact with parents:

- allows children to express their emotional reactions to the separation from their parent.
- helps parents deal with separation and loss issues.
- helps the child develop a more realistic understanding of their parent’s circumstances and allows parents to model appropriate interaction.
- allows children to maintain existing relationships with their parents - contributing to a successful family reunification.
- improves recidivism rates—parents who maintain contact with their children are shown to be less likely to recidivate than inmates who do not maintain contact with families.
- helps children preserve important connections.
- allows children to know that their parent is safe.
- helps to develop and maintain the role of the parent.

Additionally, “[r]esearch indicates that consistent and continued parent-child contact is necessary for a child to successfully bond with a parent and has positive implications for forging positive relationships later in life. Contact visitation helps normalize the situation and the interaction between parent and child, and benefitting children emotionally and behaviorally.”³²

²⁶ *Inmate Programs*, TRAVIS COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE, no date, https://www.tcsheriff.org/images/docs/inmate_jail/Programs_Brochure.pdf.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Travis County Sheriff’s Office Visitation*.

³¹ *Connecting Children With Incarcerated Parents*, ADVOCACY INC., ET AL., no date, <http://childlaw.unm.edu/docs/BEST-PRACTICES/Connecting%20Children%20with%20Incarcerated%20Parents%20%282011%29.pdf>

³² *Id.*

Federal Communications Commission Reduction in Phone Call Fees

In a 3-1 vote, with Commissioner Gerald Daugherty (R) voting against a reduction in phone calls fees, the Commissioner's Court voted to reduce the cost of phone calls in the Travis County Jail.³³ "The change was in part precipitated by a Federal Communications Commission order issued in October that calls for sharp reductions in the fees and rates that inmates pay for phone calls, video visitations and other telecom services."³⁴ Before this vote, it cost \$4.65 to make a 20 minute phone call. Now it will cost \$1.65.³⁵

My Plan To Address In-Person Visitation in Travis County

- Work with the Judge Sarah Eckhardt and the Commissioners Court to implement and continue in-person visitation and make video visits supplemental.
- Provide adequate information about visiting procedures in multiple languages.
- Partner with other law enforcement agencies to expand free options for video visitation.
- Review visiting procedures that may be uncomfortable to children.
- Look into offering video visitation vouchers for children who cannot visit the jail.
- Scrutinize the Securus video visitation contract and insist that Securus list and justify not just the cost of each video visit, but all fees charged to families.
- Help ensure that there are no extra fees charges in addition to what is detailed in the Securus video visitation contract. Make fees understandable.
- Support quality parenting education such as PACT and PRIDE that allow for child in-person contact visits.

³³ *County nixes revenue to save inmates money*, AUSTIN MONITOR, Dec. 9, 2015, <http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/2015/12/travis-county-nixes-six-figure-revenue-save-inmates-money/>.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*