



09/13/2011

Tenn. jail considers Internet kiosks for inmates

Officials are interviewing companies that would install and service the machines throughout the jail

By Beth Burger
Chattanooga Times Free Press

HAMILTON COUNTY, Tenn. — Posting a cash bond. Ordering barbecue pork skins and MoonPies. Submitting a grievance about a jailer.

Those are among the things inmates soon could be doing through Internet-connected kiosks at the Hamilton County Jail.

Officials are interviewing companies that would install and service the machines throughout the jail, which houses about 500 inmates at the downtown facility.

Depending on the company used, the machines would be installed at no cost to taxpayers. The costs would be paid through user fees of \$3 to \$4 that family members or loved ones would incur when money is loaded into inmates' accounts.

Sheriff Jim Hammond said having kiosks means jailers wouldn't have to keep up with cash taken from people booked into the jail. Instead, their cash would be electronically placed into the account. Inmates could see their balances, so they couldn't accuse jailers of stealing their money, Hammond said.

Commissary orders would be delivered by the vendors to the jail. The technology would allow inmates to use electronic forms for medical requests and to pay for limited email service.

The kiosks can also be used to pay bonds, Hammond said.

"We're finding, in smaller bonds, a lot of jails are putting in these kiosks where you can put your credit card in and get your husband out or boyfriend," he said. "Just by slipping the card in, his name comes up, you see the bond. They take it right off the card. You sign it and out the door you go.

"That's making bondsmen very, very nervous," he said.

Bonding companies usually charge up to 10 percent of a bond's total amount to get someone out.

Last month, Hamilton County Sessions Court clerks reported 13 cash bonds posted totaling \$21,875. It's unclear if the number of cash bonds would rise if the kiosks were installed at the jail. Sessions Court already accepts credit cards at the annex next to the jail and charges no fees.

Charles White Sr., president of the Tennessee Association of Professional Bond Agents and owner of the local Volunteer and ABC bonding companies, said the machines could cut into the bail bonding market.

"The sheriff's office is entertaining entering into an agreement that would take away the largest portion of our market share from us," he said.

Hammond said the idea is in the preliminary stages.

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"I don't want to make the bondsmen out there nervous. It is not something we are anticipating at this moment," he said. "There may come a point when the county has to consider things like that. ... We have to look at everything in order to save us money."

White pointed out that bail bondsmen actively look for anyone who misses court.

"We're liable to the county for the face of the bond and bringing the defendant back to court," he said.

Hammond agreed.

"It's one of the things that kiosks won't do. Bondsmen are always looking for bail jumpers," Hammond said.

White said that in other parts of the state where similar systems were implemented, fugitive units had to increase the number of detectives. The number of defendants who missed court grew too, he said.

Because the kiosk would have so many functions, White also said it's possible the bond function won't be used that often.

"I don't foresee it will be used that often for the bail portion," White said, noting someone might use a credit card to swipe at the machine for a charge such as a DUI. "What I see using it mostly, are the more educated, transient people coming through on vacation or something of that kind of nature."

IN BRADLEY COUNTY

Jacqlyn Stone, a regional sales manager for kiosk vendor Swanson Services Corp., made a presentation to jail officials in Hamilton County last week.

"The kiosk is an employee who never goes on vacation," Stone said, noting the 24-hour availability.

The company works with more than 40 corrections facilities throughout the state, including the Bradley County Jail, which has about 400 inmates.

"It saves us a lot of extra time. They used to fill out a piece of paper and we would have to take the paper and key it in. Now it goes straight from the [kiosk]," said Bradley County Sheriff's Office Capt. Jon Collins, who oversees the jail. "It's pretty much a seamless operation and it keeps us from handling cash."

Cynda Moore, who handles the commissary at the Bradley County Jail, said paper usage has declined by 75 percent and the jail's paper currency is down by half.

"It has taken away the need for pencil and paper," Moore said, noting pencils can be used as sharp objects by inmates. "We always have to think one step ahead."

Sales from the jail's commissary doubled with the electronic system, Moore said. Out of those sales, the county gets 35 percent.

Last year in the Hamilton County Jail, about \$284,000 was spent on commissary items, with the county making about \$75,000 in revenue, officials said.

Stone said the machines are equipped with security measures, including cameras and a fingerprint scan for inmates. Anyone depositing funds with a credit card must swipe a driver's license with a matching address, she said.

Collins said most inmates in Bradley County still post bonds the traditional way, through a bondsman.

"I think just for the ease of the commissary, even if that's all [Hamilton County] uses, it is worth it," he said.

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