

KEEPING FAMILIES CONNECTED

Information pertaining to the need for free communication services for Dane County Jail residents, using a system that is accountable to the public.

ABOUT JAILS & PUNISHMENT

What is a jail vs a prison?

Jails are run by local governments, like a county, and are used to detain people who are 1) waiting for a trial in court or 2) serving short (less than 1 year) sentences. In some cases, they are used by immigration enforcement to hold people who have not committed or been accused of committing a crime or for “revocation” (detention for someone accused of violating a probation agreement).

Prisons are run by a state or federal government. They are used to imprison people who have been tried and found guilty of a crime when they are serving longer-term sentences.

Around 80% of all arrests that hold people in jail throughout the United States are for low-level misdemeanor offenses, like disorderly conduct and drug abuse. Less than 5% are for violent offenses¹.

Two-thirds of all people in jail haven’t been convicted of a crime, but are most often being detained there pretrial, simply because they cannot afford bail.²

What do we know about the Dane County Jail?

The Dane County Jail is run by the Dane County Sheriff's office, and serves as a means to detain residents from across all of Dane County, the majority of whom are being held before receiving a fair trial because of an inability to afford bail.

Some statistics about the the Dane County Jail: ³

¹ [Every Three Seconds: Arrest Trends | Vera Institute](#)

² [The Difference between Jail and Prison | Vera Institute](#)

³ [Dane County, Wisconsin | Incarceration Trends | Vera Institute of Justice](#)

- The Dane County Jail detains approximately 600 people on an average day.
- The average stay for a person held at the Dane County Jail is about three weeks. Despite most people's assumption that people are only in the jail for a few days, the average length of stay tells a different story. Our coalition obtained booking data of all jail residents during the year of 2025 from a Freedom of Information Act request, which shows that the average length of stay was 21.4 days⁴. This takes into account the fact that those staying in jail longer are those who cannot afford bail and are most impacted by fees to communicate with families.
 - You may hear some people cite the median jail stay of a few days, which is true - but ignores the reason why the median is much shorter than the average. Many people leave within a few days of arriving once they have their arraignment hearing. These residents leave jail because charges are dropped (meaning they were detained without enough evidence for a case to be brought against them) or because they have the financial means to afford paying bail. The amount of bail required is a subjective and potentially biased judgement based on anything from likelihood of returning to court, seriousness of offense, prior legal history, or danger to the community.
 - Enough people are held for extended periods of time, however, to make the average stay much longer than a few days. Without the counterbalance of people who are released quickly because of their financial resources or lack of probable cause, we can deduce that folks who are unable to pay bail are often held much longer than the average stay suggests. These residents also deserve to have their basic needs met for the duration of their jail stay.
- The average communication cost for a jail resident and their family is \$129/month⁵. A person working at a minimum wage job would have to work at least an extra 18 hours per month to afford to communicate with a jailed loved one each month. Considering that the person being detained may be a breadwinner or caretaker themselves, and given that the other family members might already be struggling to make up for lost income or caretaking support, as well as paying significant legal

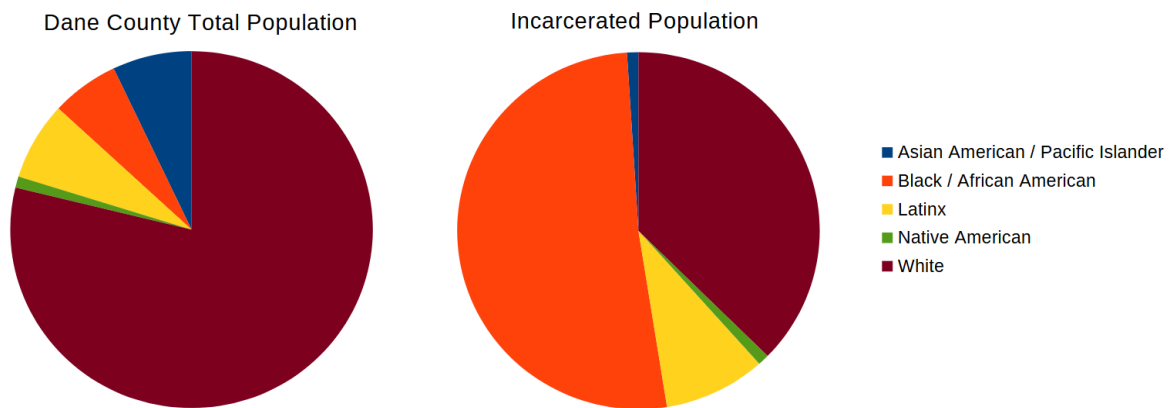
⁴ [FOIA request from 4/10/2026](#)

⁵ [wkow.com](#)

fees, it is not surprising that 1 in 3 families, across the country, go into debt paying to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones.⁶

- Dane County persists in having dramatic racial disparities that show up in who is detained in the county jail. Nearly half (51%) of the residents in Dane County jail are Black, despite only 6% of the Dane County population being Black. The pie chart below shows the difference between the racial makeup of Dane County versus the demographics of jail residents.

- Racial & Ethnic Disparities:



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It is important to note that because of the ways that policing disproportionately targets Black and Latine community members, and the fact that jail residents are often detained for longer periods of time because they are unable to afford cash bail, keeping families connected through free communication is an issue of racial and class-based equity. The consequences of fee-based communication are inequitably distributed, and we owe it to each person who lives in Dane County to actively un-do systems of exploitation and systems that have discriminatory impact.

What is abolition and why are we working toward it?

Abolition is a call to end the organized use of coercion, violence, and detention against the people. The state and the wealthy utilize systems like policing, jails, and prisons to exert

⁶ <https://ellabakercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Who-Pays-exec-summary.pdf>

⁷ Dane County Population Statistics: [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Dane County, Wisconsin](#)

Dane County Jail Resident Statistics: [Jail Snapshot | Dane County Community Justice Council](#)

unjust control over people, seize political power, and increase their own profits. Policing, jails, and prisons, and the threat of these systems, are used to control and contain the people and prevent us from collectively changing the status quo.

In conservative rhetoric, this is done in the name of “public safety,” villainizing community members and depicting police as brave protectors. In liberal and progressive rhetoric, this is done in the name of “service,” making vulnerable community members the objects of public pity and framing police officers as benevolent helpers.

Both of these narratives are myths. Regardless of language, policing always uses violence or the threat of violence against the people and creates communities governed by fear and isolation. Abolitionists work to free us from this system.

We the people deserve systems of accountability and healing justice that are rooted in our shared humanity and that benefit us all by creating safety and community, rather than the current system of coercive control that benefits just a few.

We have been taught that policing and jails are necessary for public safety, and it takes imagination to see that this might not be true. Policing, jails, and prisons are a relatively new phenomena in the scope of human history. Restorative justice frameworks, Scandinavian legal systems, and proactive social support all can lead to safer and more just communities than the dominant carceral system in the United States. Abolitionists invite us to imagine and actively build better systems for all of us.

ABOUT JAIL COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

What are for-profit jail communication systems?

Jail communication companies create a monopoly over critical resources and in Dane County use that monopoly to place the entire expense of jail communications on the jail residents and their support systems. They entice governments to give them exclusive access to jail and prison residents’ communications by promising “secure” communication and by making surveillance of that communication more convenient for authorities.

These charges can include fees for phone calls, video calls, text messages, and emails. Many jail communication companies also facilitate mail scanning – a practice where

residents' mail is sent out of state and then photocopied, with the original being destroyed. This delays residents from receiving their mail and makes written mail more impersonal, funneling more communication into the methods that are fee based (like video calls) and thereby increasing the companies' profits.

Most major companies facilitate this communication through company-supplied tablets that also seek to generate revenue by selling entertainment and educational resources like books, movies, and music. These companies then also utilize and sell the data from these purchases and communications.

How do jail communication systems fit into the larger carceral state?

Prisons and jails exist to restrict the free movement of people, to create a captive workforce, to control the public by threatening incarceration. This is done under the guise of public safety, but the majority of people being imprisoned are held for nonviolent offenses and the majority of people in jails are locked away – not because they are a danger to the public – but because they cannot afford cash bail.

In the case of for-profit prisons and for-profit contracted companies like those used for jail communication systems, this system also funnels public money to private shareholders. In a public jail like Dane County, there can be any number of contracts with for-profit companies to provide services (like healthcare), to sell goods to residents (through the commissary), or to do both (like the jail communication system).

Using a for-profit jail communication system does not just funnel financial resources from jail residents and their families to an out-of-state company and its shareholders, it also allows for jail residents' rights to be violated. Jail communication companies make it easier for the state to censor and spy on jail residents' communications. Because of the surveillance that jail communication companies provide, there are legitimate concerns about these companies being used to limit first amendment free speech rights and to violate fourth amendment privacy rights.⁸ After public advocacy, the Dane County Board has sought to mitigate data privacy concerns through added language to the 2025 communication contract extension and in the proposed 2026 contract. However, issues about overreaching law enforcement surveillance remain.

⁸ [Incarcerated Individuals & Advocacy Groups Challenge California County's Policy of Digitizing and Destroying Jail Mail | Electronic Frontier Foundation](#) & [Pennsylvania Replaced Prison Mail With Photocopies. Inmates and Their Families Are Heartbroken. – Mother Jones](#)

Why are we opposed to for-profit jail communication systems?

Communications are an essential service to local community members inside and outside of jail. Because our community chooses to incarcerate people, it is our duty to provide for the needs of those people while they are behind bars. It is also our duty to protect the people being detained in the county jail from exploitation.

- Providing for Needs: Jail communication companies make human connection, which is necessary for survival, a commodity. Regular and consistent communication with support systems allows incarcerated people to plan for their release. But they sell the right to communication to jail residents and their loved ones, with fees increasing per minute and per message. They have a monopoly on this service, and residents have no other option for staying connected with their families except to pay these fees.
- Protecting from Exploitation: Jail communication companies facilitate heightened surveillance, censor communication, and sell the data of jail residents and those they contact. This is done through contracted services that are motivated by profit and not accountable to the public, putting jail residents and their loved ones at even greater risk because essential services and personal information are in the hands of corporations that do not hold to an ethic of ensuring public good.

What communication system is in place in Dane County Jail right now?

The Dane County Jail currently contracts with Viapath, which charges jail residents usage fees for phone calls, video calls, emails/messages, and entertainment. The current rates for communication are listed below. Extra fees, like credit card surcharges, can be added on to these rates.

Type of Communication	Cost ⁹
Phone call (prepaid, debit, and collect)	\$0.07/minute
Remote video visit	\$0.12/minute (some free video visits are available).
Written message	\$0.25/message
Photo attachment	\$0.25/photo, in addition to price per written

⁹ [Dane County 2025 RES 179](#)

Type of Communication	Cost ⁹
	message
Educational and Entertainment Content	\$0.05/minute ¹⁰

This current contract is an extension from a past contract with Viapath, and is not a permanent solution to the question of how to provide communication options to jail residents and their loved ones. In the summer of 2025, the Dane County Board of Supervisors considered a proposal from the Dane County Sheriff to sign a contract with Smart Communications for the next five years to provide similar services. Objecting to this new contract because of concerns about data privacy, mail scanning, accountability, and the further exploitation of our community members, the public spoke out against this contract and the County Board voted against signing.

What about the new proposed contract?

Despite the County Board rejecting the SMART Communications contract in the fall, there still needs to be some communication system in place for the jail. As of March 2026, the sheriff’s department announced that they would be working on the other of the two bids they received in last year’s process for a new contract. Most County Supervisors and community members had not expected this, instead assuming a new call for proposals would occur.

This bid that the sheriff’s department is pushing forward is with the current contractor, Viapath, and still requires a new contract to be approved. This new contract still does not offer free communication. Our group continues to advocate that the county board and sheriff’s office find another, more ethical system.

This latest version of the proposed contract offers 10 free minutes of calls per person per day¹¹. This is a step forward, but it is far from meeting the true need. Under this proposed contract, a jail resident may have to choose between talking to their employer about arranging shifts after their release date or saying goodnight to their child. They may have to choose between seeking support from a community organization or comforting their partner on a hard day.

¹⁰ Currently, these funds can be transferred to the jail residents account using the JailATM.com web site, which is also used for commissary.

¹¹ [2025 RES-414](#)

For people who are in jail for just a few days, they may need to contact a slew of people to update them and make arrangements for time off work, bills to be paid, back up childcare, and putting together a legal team. They, too, deserve to call their family to say “goodnight” and “I love you”. With a single 10 minute call, they are limited to attending to a single matter in their life while the rest may be spiraling out of control.

What if jail residents are unable to afford communication services?

Indigent status may be granted if a person is unable to afford communication services. In order to qualify for this status, jail residents must meet a complex series of requirements¹² that is up to the discretion of the sheriff’s office, including but not limited to maintaining a certain balance in their accounts. What those additional requirements are may vary in practice, but residents must maintain those requirements for a full week. That is a week of potentially full isolation from outside the jail. A week is too late to make calls if you’re not showing up to your shifts at work. A week of not being able to talk with your partner or child can create lasting pain for the jail resident’s loved ones. A week of isolation can mean an immense amount of distress for jail residents. The exceptions that the county makes for the jail residents who are most financially in-need come into effect after harm has already been done.

What are jail communication systems used for?

Jail residents use communication systems to speak with their legal teams, their loved ones, local service providers, their employers, and their schools. A person who finds themselves in jail may need to arrange time off of work, for a family member to care for their child, or for their rent to be paid differently during their incarceration. A jail resident will also need to communicate with lawyers and other local advocates while they await trial. Communication is also important to arrange for the building blocks of a successful reentry.

Perhaps most importantly, a jail resident may need to seek support from their loved ones in a time of extreme stress, to tell their partner they love and miss them, and to wish their child good luck at their next soccer game or tell them goodnight before bed. Anything that a community member outside of jail needs to text, call, or email people about, a person living within jail might need to communicate about too.

¹² [FOIA request from 4/10/2026](#)

When a person has experienced the trauma of having their liberty taken away and being separated from their family and other loved ones, they need interpersonal connection and care. Jail communication systems could provide a lifeline to community members in distress by keeping families connected.

Can't jail residents just have in-person visitors?

Jail residents can have in-person visitors, but only at certain times, and these "privileges" can be revoked as was the case during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to visit in person, the jail resident's loved one has to be available at specific times, find and pay for safe transportation to the jail, and enter an institution with armed guards. For loved ones with multiple jobs and time commitments, and for families struggling financially, this can be incredibly difficult. Furthermore, for justice-involved families, this is not a neutral experience and can invoke reasonable distress.

Jail residents also need to communicate with service providers, employers, landlords, advocates, and their legal teams. Using in-person visits to coordinate this communication is often not feasible.

Free communication systems are critical for jail residents to stay in touch with their loved ones and support systems without accumulating massive debt. Relying on in-person visits alone would limit jail residents to getting support from people who don't work during visiting hours, have reliable transportation, and are able to take time to get to and from the jail. It would require our world not to have pandemics, or major traffic jams, or weather emergencies that make roads unsafe. It would require landlords and bosses who have enough generosity to visit the jail to conduct business, and lawyers, social workers, and other service providers who have enough time in their day to do so as well.

Offering limited opportunities for in-person visits is not a reasonable alternative to free communication systems.

Who pays for for-profit jail communications, and who profits?

For-profit jail communications companies like Viapath and Smart Communications are owned by shareholders who ultimately exploit jail residents and their loved ones. Jail residents and their loved ones pay usage fees to communicate with one another, resulting

in 1 out of 3 families with an incarcerated loved one going into debt in order to stay connected.¹³

This means that a jail resident and their family in Dane County have to pay per minute or per message to communicate, and that this money leaves the state. In the currently proposed contract with Viapath, jail residents would have to both pay fees per message, and pay fees per minute it takes to compose each message. Local families, many of whom are already struggling financially as evidenced by the inability to pay cash bail,¹⁴ have to bear the cost for the basic survival need of human connection.

These fees limit jail residents' ability to stay connected with their families and loved ones. With infrequent contact because of the cost, loved ones are less able to support jail residents as they face incredibly stressful circumstances. The result is extreme isolation for many jail residents.

This isolation has significant psychological and social consequences and creates increased costs for mental healthcare, addiction services, and an ever-ballooning policing and jailing system in the county. While the cost of *communication* lands on families who are already experiencing financial distress, taxpayers collectively bear the cost of these additional services that are needed because of the isolation that communication fees create.¹⁵

These fees go directly to Viapath and do not go to the county. While the county receives no financial benefit from this arrangement, profit is extracted from our community members and jail residents. Perceived "benefits" from these contracts to the county include allowing the sheriff's office to more conveniently surveil and censor jail residents' communications, and reduced workload due to outsourcing the work of meeting jail residents' basic needs.

Why is jail communication using such an outdated fee structure?

Jail communication companies charge residents and their families usage fees, meaning the costs to stay connected is per message and per minute. This is a model that was common in cell phone fees 25+ years ago, and changed as public communication needs and patterns shifted and as companies competed for business. Jail communication companies

¹³ [Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families - Ella Baker Center for Human Rights](#)

¹⁴ [The Difference between Jail and Prison | Vera Institute](#)

¹⁵ [An Updated Systematic Literature Review of the Economic Costs of Loneliness and Social Isolation and the Cost Effectiveness of Interventions](#)

still use this outdated model, however, in order to maximize profit in a market they monopolize. Because jail residents and their families have no other choice but to pay fees if they want to stay connected, jail communication companies like Viapath have no incentive to change.

In recent years, our Dane County Board and many other local and state governments have allowed private corporations to create a monopoly on communication and connection, and without any competition, these companies have no motivation to change and better meet the needs of the people using their services. But together we can find a better way.

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2011, the average person sent and received 40 text messages a day.¹⁶ Today, that average is likely higher. Even at this conservative estimate of daily messages, with Dane County's rate of \$0.25 per message, communication fees just for text messages for the average-length stay of three weeks in Dane County Jail would cost a person \$210.

We know that Dane County Jail residents do not communicate with loved ones as often as this average would suggest—likely because of the exorbitant fees they would be charged. Under the current system, connection with loved ones while experiencing crisis has to be budgeted. Jailed community members experience not just a loss of liberty, but also acute trauma and a decreased interpersonal connection which could otherwise help them cope with this trauma. The average charge for communication in Dane County over a one-month period is \$130¹⁷—meaning that jail residents are able to message their loved ones significantly less than the average person did 15 years ago.

Every lost message, phone call, and video visit adds to a jail resident's isolation. And every opportunity for free communication would restore some of what has been lost and would keep families connected.

¹⁶ PEW: [How Americans Use Text Messaging | Pew Research Center](#) This is the most recent research available that quantifies average messages per person that was not funded or conducted by for-profit companies seeking to sell services. We know that communication patterns have changed in the past 15 years, and predict based on lived experience that average-daily-messages have increased.

¹⁷ [wkow.com](#)

Who decides how the jail communication system works?

In Dane County, the sheriff's department issues a request for proposal (RFP) and companies bid on a contract with the county jail. The sheriff's department then selects a contract they view as favorable, and the County Board determines whether to approve this contract or not. All negotiation with communication companies happens through the sheriff's department.

The sheriff's department as a whole is designed to 1) control the community through the coercive threat of jail, 2) control jail residents while they are detained, 3) reconcile their own budget by using as few resources as possible to do the above, and 4) maintain their public image as "protectors" in our community so that their control remains unquestioned. The requests for proposals that they issue, contracts they select, and negotiations they lead reflect these priorities.

The Dane County Board of Supervisors is the body of elected officials who oversee county-related matters, such as the jail. The board is made of 37 supervisors from districts across Dane County.¹⁸ While the sheriff is also an elected official, the public has a more direct power over the supervisors through their representation and accountability to the public.

Dane County most recently went through the RFP process in 2025, when the sheriff's office put out an RFP for communication contracts, received two bids, and brought forward a bid from Smart Communications that would have involved up to 5 years of continued monopoly on communications and the addition of mail-scanning. It's important to note that the process was rushed and not transparent by the sheriff's office. After public outcry and the mis-handling of the process by the sheriff's department, the county board voted against the contract. The sheriff's office continues with poor communication with the newest proposal for a new contract with Viapath.

What is the purpose of a public service, and why should jail communication be publicly funded?

Public services exist to meet the basic needs of people through efficient systems accountable to the taxpayer. Because we all use roads, we all pay for roads through our taxes and can hold decision makers accountable about how that money is allocated.

¹⁸ [List of Dane County Supervisors - Map](#)

Because we all benefit from an educated public, we all contribute financially to public schools through property taxes or (by proxy) through rent payments.

The public would benefit from keeping families connected through free jail communications in key ways that justify the use of tax dollars to support the cost.

- When incarcerated people have strong connections with their families, recidivism becomes less likely. Keeping families connected while a loved one is in jail is a proactive way to reduce crime in our community.¹⁹
- Connection with loved ones decreases mental illness, suicidality, and drug use among incarcerated people. Keeping families connected decreases potential costs of providing mental healthcare, addiction treatment, and drug-related policing.²⁰
- For children of incarcerated parents, staying connected likewise reduces drug use. Keeping families connected helps children in our community stay healthy and safe.²¹

If the sheriff's office purports that incarcerating 600 people per day is a public good, then meeting the basic survival needs of those people should not be treated as optional. Jail residents are Dane County community members, and the sheriff's department and county board have a duty to their wellbeing.

WHAT FREE COMMUNICATION COULD LOOK LIKE

Why is free communication valuable to those in jail and their families?

Connection with loved ones is a survival need. It is through community that most of our other survival needs (like food, shelter, water) are met. It is through community that our socioemotional needs are met. The access to communication also allows incarcerated

¹⁹ [Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families | Prison Policy Initiative](#)

²⁰ [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#)

²¹ [Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families | Prison Policy Initiative](#)

people to plan for their release. Free communication—the ability to stay connected to loved ones—isn't just valuable. It's essential.

- Strong connections with family and loved ones reduces the likelihood that a person will return to jail or prison for a different crime after they are released.
- When children have parents in jail and prison, the more connected they are to those parents, the less likely it is that they'll use illicit drugs.
- Jail and prison residents who are connected with their family are less likely to be involved in violence or misconduct behind bars.²²
- Isolation leads to mental illness, suicidality, substance abuse,²³ violence, and innumerable physical health problems.²⁴ Connection with loved ones is the antidote.

Jail communication benefits not only the person who is being detained, but also their entire family and community. It sustains relationships that are essential for both the person detained and their loved ones. These relationships offer hope and connection, and support formerly jailed people after they are released.

Jail communication also supports the wellbeing of other people within the jail and prison system, including peers who are detained and justice professionals who work in these systems. Solid relationships and regular contact with loved ones decreases tensions within jails, reduces violence, and minimizes jail misconduct. This makes facilities safer for everyone²⁵.

²² [Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families | Prison Policy Initiative](#)

²³ [An overview of systematic reviews on the public health consequences of social isolation and loneliness & The role of social isolation in opioid addiction](#)

²⁴ [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#)

²⁵ [RESEARCH ROUND-UP: Officer Safety Benefits of Free Communications](#)

Why is fee-based communication harmful to those in jail and their families?

The carceral system and third-party private jail communication companies inflict high costs of calls and communication on families, causing lasting harm. 1 in 3 families, across the county, go into debt paying to stay connected with their loved ones in jail.²⁶

The majority of those in the Dane County Jail are detained because they cannot pay bail, meaning they and their families very likely do not have the extra money to pay for communication costs in and out of jail. Communication is key to not only stay connected with family, but to contact employers, landlords, or child care providers while a person is detained in jail. And all too often, it is a question of making those calls or avoiding debt.

The disincentivization of communication with loved ones through the imposition of fees, can have negative impacts on jail residents, their loved ones, and the community as a whole as illustrated throughout this report. Because this barrier is economic, these consequences are most acute for families who are struggling financially.

What do we mean by “free”?

By “free,” we mean without any additional fees or costs to jail residents and their loved ones. Jail residents and their loved ones should not be charged any fees for using communication systems. Their ability to communicate with and maintain relationships with loved ones is essential for their own wellbeing and survival and for the wellbeing of our community at large.

Some locales have implemented partially free communications—waiving fees for a set amount of phone calls or waiving fees for people at a certain income level. We are advocating for free communication for all residents, with no usage threshold at which usage fees should be charged.

A parent should be granted access to saying goodnight to their child every night, not just twice per month. A young adult should be able to call their parent if they’re having a particularly difficult day instead of having to ration a limited amount of minutes throughout the month. When a jail resident needs to laugh or cry or remember that they are loved, they shouldn't have to verify whether they’ve already contacted their loved ones too many

²⁶ [Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families - Ella Baker Center for Human Rights](#)

times. All fees for communication are unjust, and by advocating for free communication, we're advocating for no fees, no matter what.

Because the devices, air waves, and any monitoring systems the jail chooses to implement may come with costs of their own, we do recognize that this would not be free for the sheriff's department. However, by choosing to incarcerate community members, the sheriff's department takes on responsibility for the wellbeing and survival of those community members they lock away. Denying folks contact with their loved ones by caging them means that the sheriff's department is responsible for providing opportunities for those community members to maintain relationships so long as they are detained.

What do we mean by “communication”?

By communication, we mean connection with loved ones and the outside world. This primarily focuses on phone calls, video calls, emails, text messages, and in-person visits—moments when jail residents have their basic needs for connection and community met, and through which they are able to maintain their relationships with loved ones. Communication can also include access to music, entertainment, news, and educational content since these are often included in jail communication contracts and since they allow jail residents to maintain a tether to the outside world.

Currently, residents of Dane County Jail pay usage fees for the majority of these services. Phone calls, video calls, emails, and text messages are currently charged per minute or per message. Access to music, entertainment, news, and educational content is similarly priced per minute.

Is free communication even possible?

We seek to meet other basic survival needs of jail residents, and connection with loved ones should be no different. Imagine if jails locked away our neighbors and didn't provide water, food, a roof, a bed.... While we could argue that these resources are suboptimal and provided at an inhumanly low level, they're there. We would consider incarceration without these resources to be cruel and unusual punishment. Connection with loved ones is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Denying folks this connection unless they have the capacity to pay usage fees is cruel and can have life-ending consequences.

In cities, counties, and states throughout the country, jails and prisons have started to recognize this and provide communication at no-cost to residents²⁷. This has resulted in lower recidivism, lower drug use, and more prosocial behavior among people who are currently or formerly incarcerated. The cost savings of this positive impact can offset the cost of providing free communication.

Is this possible in Dane County? Absolutely. The non-profit group Worth Rises ran a fiscal report based on Dane County's jail statistics and population, and using their extensive data on call rates, determined that Dane County could provide free calls for everyone in jail for as little as \$195,000 per year. Incredibly, their analysis shows that free calls would save Dane County families \$420,000 per year²⁸.

This is only a question of imagination and priorities. If we can pay to build a multi-million dollar building to keep nonviolent community members away from their families and their work, then we can afford the much smaller cost of free communication. Dane County's Sheriff has even said that he would "100%" support the county providing free communication for those in jail²⁹.

How would free calls impact call volume and therefore costs?

In jurisdictions that have implemented free calls, data shows that people use, on average, 45 minutes per day worth of calls³⁰. These jurisdictions have successfully implemented free calls without having to expand infrastructure.

It's also important to point out that these jurisdictions do not pay the same rate as what would normally be charged directly to jail residents. Instead, most contracts are negotiated using lump-sum payments rather than usage fees, helping governments budget for predictable costs.

²⁷ [Worth Rises Prison & Jail Telecom Data](#)

²⁸ [Worth Rises Dane County Fiscal Report, March 23, 2026](#)

²⁹ [Sheriff wants free communication - County Board Meeting 3/24/2026](#)

³⁰ Based on actual usage data Worth Rises has obtained from jurisdictions that have implemented free calling through tablet devices (from email conversations with Worth Rises)

ACCOUNTABILITY IN COMMUNICATIONS

What do we mean “accountable to the public”?

We envision a communication system that is not only free to those in jail, but that is also answerable to the public. Contracting with for-profit companies, particularly engaging in long-term contracts with these companies, reduces opportunities for the public to object when quality services are not provided.

In order to object to poor treatment or inadequate services, a community member would have to advocate through the board and sheriff's office, who could then raise their objection to the company. Jail residents are left waiting for others to negotiate and advocate on their behalf.

A publicly accountable system would be self-sufficient and not rely on a third-party private company that could exploit our people or fail to provide adequate services. It would allow community members, including jail residents and their loved ones, to voice their needs directly to the service provider—the county officials they elected.

When a system is accountable to the public, we have a clear voice at the table. Social services and elected officials are here to serve the people, and we should have a say in how these social services are run.

Why does public accountability matter?

Public accountability matters for a variety of reasons.

If there is a flaw in the system, and the system is public-owned, we have authority to fix it. If quality services are not provided, the public can advocate to the individuals employed by the county or elected to the county board and demand change. If instead, we contract through an outside for-profit company, we may be bound through a contract to continue paying for subpar services. The democratic process is undermined when public officials agree to outsource public services to for-profit companies that do not have our best interest in mind and that we cannot call to account when they fail us.

Because jail residents do not have a choice in which service provider to use for communication, it is the county's responsibility to ensure the highest quality of service.

This is less possible if we use a third-party provider whose motivation is not to represent and care for Dane County residents, but is instead to increase profit for those out-of-state.

Having services accountable to the public is also important because of jail residents' and other community members' rights to privacy. A third party may use or sell data collected in ways that are against public interest. A system accountable to the public would have to answer to taxpayers if data was mishandled or shared without full and informed consent.

When parts of the system are tucked away behind third-party contracts, the public has less say as to their operation. Bad actors can take advantage of the systems more easily because processes become less transparent, and because the public is not positioned to enact consequences against these bad actors.

Why does data privacy and censorship matter?

Jail residents have no other option for communication outside of using the jail's communication system, and connection with loved ones is a survival need. When jail residents are required to agree to terms and conditions in order to speak to their loved ones, there is no reasonable option to refuse. That means incarcerated people (and their family) cannot give engaged consent to the sale of their data, since deciding to not communicate in order to maintain ownership of their data could have life-altering and life-ending consequences.

For-profit communication companies collect and retain incarcerated people's data and the data of those they contact indefinitely,³¹ even flouting contract terms that dictate otherwise. Companies can then sell that data to advertisers and data brokers.³²

Furthermore, communication companies facilitate the further surveillance and censorship of jail residents who already have their privacy compromised. The censorship of communication with loved ones, and the sale of residents' and their loved ones' data is a challenge to first and fourth amendment rights. It is a coercive practice that sets a dangerous precedent in our community.

³¹ [Pennsylvania Replaced Prison Mail With Photocopies. Inmates and Their Families Are Heartbroken. – Mother Jones](#)

³² [Privacy Policy](#)

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

How does this help the community?

Jail residents are Dane County community members. They have actively contributed to the community before being detained, continue to be community members while residing in Dane County Jail, and after trial or serving a sentence, will return to the community at large. Supporting the wellbeing of jail residents IS supporting the wellbeing of community members.

We also know that the financial burden of communication is one that lands on directly impacted Dane County residents. Jail residents and their loved ones pay significant fees to remain in communication. Reducing and eliminating costs for families who just lost one income means that those families will have more space in their budget to meet needs and are less likely to go into debt to stay connected.

The psychological and social burden of isolation is also borne by our community members—both those who are residents of the jail and their loved ones and children throughout the community. Inversely, when we keep families connected there are opportunities for shared joy, grief, and comfort. Free communications allows the families in our communities to remain whole.

Finally, we know that increased isolation and decreased connection with loved ones leads to recidivism and jail misconduct. The financial burden of increased policing, court fees, and jailing, and the increased financial burden of staff who are required to resolve conflict within the jail, rests on all taxpayers. Instead of using public funds to keep families connected, we are using public funds to respond to the consequences of disconnection. By reducing crime and misconduct, free communication could have tangible, measurable safety benefits to our community members—both those who are justice-involved and otherwise.

It is important to note that because of the ways that policing disproportionately targets Black and Latine community members, and the fact that jail residents are often detained for longer periods of time because they are unable to afford cash bail, keeping families connected through free communication is an issue of racial and class-based equity. The consequences of fee-based communication are inequitably distributed, and we owe it to

each person who lives in Dane County to actively un-do systems of exploitation and systems that have discriminatory impact.

Everyone in jail will be released, and upon re-entry, we want former jail residents to be equipped with the tools to re-establish themselves in the community, without financial debt from paying communication fees, and without the psychological debt and trauma from isolation caused by lack of communication. Communication can help with this in these ways:

- Communication strengthens the relationships people need to ensure they are successful and thrive after release.
- Regular and consistent communication with support systems allows incarcerated people to plan for their release. This includes critical things like securing housing and employment.
- There are immeasurable social and fiscal benefits to the individuals released, their families, their immediate communities, and Dane County as a whole.

It is the job of the county and sheriff to give the best tools possible to those released from jail. In Dane County Sheriff Barrett's own words: "Our ultimate goal is to provide the best services for those that are within our care, and provide a safe, rehabilitative facility."³³

Communication is essential for safety and rehabilitation. We need to make sure that promise is upheld through free and accountable communication.

What can community members do to help?

County supervisors and staff in the sheriff's department can take tangible steps to create free communication systems that keep families connected. **The first step is for the County Board to deny the current proposed contract with Viapath so that a better alternative can be implemented.**

After that, they can take accountability for the ways that our current and past systems have caused harm, and commit to systems that are humane. This includes immediately budgeting for the county to cover communication costs, continuing to insist on data privacy measures, building a county-administered system for high-quality communication between jail residents and their loved ones, and passing legislation that asserts jail

³³ [FULL NEWS CONFERENCE: Dane County Sheriff speaks ahead of vote on jail communications contract](#)

residents' rights to connection with their loved ones and communication with their service providers without additional costs.

Community members can support this cause by advocating to their board members at meetings and via phone or email - specifically asking them to vote against the proposed Viapath contract. Along with that, they can share this content with their friends and neighbors. Call your news station or write a letter to the editor. Join us in organizing for our neighbors who are being detained. Those of us who wrote this document attend county board and committee meetings to advocate. Come meet us and join our work!

This was too long, and I couldn't read it all. What do I need to know?

- The current, fee-based system of contracting with a for-profit company to provide communication services to residents is incredibly exploitative and harmful to jail residents, their loved ones and the community as a whole. Systems like this...
 - Contribute to higher rates of isolation, mental health distress, jail misconduct, recidivism, and drug abuse among incarcerated people and their children.
 - Lead to incredibly high fees for families and result in debt for 1 in 3 families who have a loved one detained.³⁴
 - Facilitate surveillance, breaches in data privacy, and the violation of people's constitutional rights.
- Jail residents and their loved ones deserve to have their basic survival needs met, including the need to stay connected.
- Advocates have clearly voiced opposition to continued exploitation and lack of accountability baked into this system, and we will continue to stand up for one another including our fellow community members who currently reside in the Dane County Jail.

³⁴ [Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families](#)