



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

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**\*\*\* PRESS RELEASE \*\*\***

**SAN FRANCISCO ANNOUNCES ALL PHONE CALLS  
FROM COUNTY JAILS ARE NOW FREE**

*San Francisco has become the first county in the nation to stop generating revenue from incarcerated people and their families, lifting an economic burden from low-income communities, boosting connection to support networks, and easing re-entry*

**San Francisco, CA** — Mayor London N. Breed, Sheriff Paul Miyamoto, and Treasurer José Cisneros announced that all phone calls from county jails are now free, effective today. San Francisco County is the first in the country to permanently stop generating revenue from incarcerated people and their families through phone calls, commissary markups, or other services. In providing free phone calls, the Sheriff's Office negotiated a first-in-the-nation fixed rate contract with GTL, a jail phone service contractor, to ensure the lowest possible cost to the City and taxpayers.

“When people are in jail they need to be able to stay connected with their family without being concerned about how much it will cost them or their loved ones. Being able to stay in touch with family is always important, but it is even more critical during a health emergency like COVID-19,” said Mayor Breed. “This change is an important continuation of our efforts to reform fines and fees that disproportionately impact low-income people and communities of color. This has truly been a team effort, and I want to thank everyone who contributed to this work for their dedication and advocacy.”

“I am grateful to my staff who worked tirelessly over the last year to advance high-impact justice reform. They created a contract that serves both the needs of in-custody people while delivering the best taxpayer return on investment,” said Sheriff Miyamoto. “Our contract is quickly becoming a model for other jurisdictions. We would not have been able to achieve this as well as other financial justice reforms without the support and commitment from Mayor Breed, Treasurer Cisneros, Supervisor Fewer and her colleagues, and the criminal justice community.”

“I am thrilled to see free phone calls being implemented in SF jails, and know that this will have a tangible impact on the lives of incarcerated people and their loved ones,” said Supervisor Sandra Lee Fewer. “This new contract again puts our city on the map as leading policy change in the name of economic justice—and where San Francisco leads, the nation will follow.”

Marking up prices for phone calls and commissary items is a common practice in jails and prisons across the country, but San Francisco now joins a growing number of cities, counties and states that are reducing or eliminating these costs, including New York City. The plan to make



jail phone calls free and end commissary markups was funded in Mayor Breed's budget for Fiscal Year 2019-20 and was developed by the Sheriff's Office over the past year.

Under the new contract with GTL, rather than paying the vendor per call minute as families did, the City will pay the vendor a fixed monthly rate per phone device. The innovative cost structure better reflects the cost of service paid by the vendor to provide access to phones in all county jails. The new contract also allows for free video calls.

The contract is a win-win for incarcerated people and the City of San Francisco. In 2018, incarcerated people and their families paid over a million dollars for phone calls from San Francisco jails. In 2020, incarcerated people will pay nothing for calls and the Sheriff's Office will seek to maximize phone access as much as possible across all jails. For the City, the contract is also a good deal. Overall, San Francisco taxpayers will pay less for jail communications than incarcerated families previously paid to the phone provider.

"As a City we should invest in the most marginalized populations in our city, not profit off of them," said Treasurer José Cisneros. "During the health pandemic it's more important than ever that families be able to connect with their incarcerated loved ones. These reforms reflect our values as San Franciscans. I hope other counties take a hard look at them and commit to do the same. I am proud that our Financial Justice Project worked with the Sheriff, Mayor, and community advocates to bring these reforms to fruition."

"San Francisco's new jail phone contract is an innovative breakthrough for the prison phone justice movement that protects incarcerated people, their families, and all taxpayers from exploitation at the hands of the predatory prison telecom industry," said Bianca Tylek, Executive Director of Worth Rises. "All prison and jail administrators should consider adopting a similar contract."

In July 2020, the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously in favor of the People Over Profits ordinance authored by Supervisor Fewer. People Over Profits permanently bans the City from profiting off jail inmates and their families via services such as phone calls and commissary items, and ensures the City cannot generate revenue through other services such as video calls and access to computer tablets.

California Senate Bill 555 (D-Holly Mitchell, Los Angeles) would dramatically reduce jail phone call rates and eliminate commissary markups statewide. The bill is being heard in the California Assembly's Appropriations Committee on Friday, August 14.

Previously, high phone call costs and an average county markup of 43% on items from the jail commissary placed an economic burden on incarcerated people and their families. Prior to these reforms, if an incarcerated person made two 15-minute phone calls a day in San Francisco, it would cost \$300 over 70 days, which is the average jail stay, or \$1,500 over the course of the year.



Analysis done by the San Francisco Financial Justice Project in the Office of Treasurer José Cisneros estimates that 80% of phone calls were paid for by incarcerated individuals' support networks, primarily low-income women of color. In a national [survey](#) of incarcerated people and their families, the cost of phone calls was identified as the primary barrier to staying in contact with loved ones in prison or jail. Studies show that people who maintain contact with their families while incarcerated are more likely to succeed after they are released and have lower recidivism rates. According to the [Vera Institute](#), the majority of people who exit the criminal justice system end up residing with a relative or spouse after their release, and staying connected with family while incarcerated helps maintain these important relationships.

In addition to implementing free jail calls, in April 2020, the Sheriff's Office eliminated commission or profit in the jail commissary (jail store) and prices dropped an average of 43%. Specific price reductions include:

- Reading glasses were \$8.00, and now cost \$4.55, a reduction of 43%
- Shoes were \$30, and now cost \$19, a reduction of 37%
- Deodorant was \$3.50, and now costs \$2.20, a reduction of 37%
- Refried beans were \$3.00, and now cost \$1.30, a reduction of 57%
- Top Ramen was \$1.08, and is now costs \$.50, a difference of 54%
- Tuna was \$3.10 and is now costs \$1.10, a difference of 65%
- Sausage was \$1.65 and is now costs \$.75, a difference of 55%

“As a formerly incarcerated woman, I often had to choose between whether I could afford a phone call home that month or whether I wouldn't call and make sure that my family had enough to pay the bills while taking care of my children,” said Amika Mota, Policy Director, Young Women's Freedom Center. “This is a huge win for San Francisco.”

“Free phone calls will make a huge difference for incarcerated people and their family members who are supporting them,” said Valentina Seden, Re-Entry Services Program Manager, Young Community Developers. “The higher the price of each call, the more difficult it is for incarcerated people to stay in touch with their circles of support—which are their lifelines and who they rely on and need to be in contact with to develop their plans of release and successfully transition back into the community. It is often close family members who typically are low-income, women of color, such as mothers, sisters, and partners, that tend to take on the financial responsibility by putting money on prepaid phone accounts to stay in touch with their loved ones. The costs add up quickly and often become unaffordable to sustain, so free calls will really help.”

This reform builds on other efforts in San Francisco to assess and reform fines and fees that disproportionately affect low-income people and communities of color. In 2018, San Francisco became the first county in the nation to eliminate administrative fees across multiple City agencies that are charged to people exiting the criminal justice system. The City and County ultimately wrote off \$32 million in debt that was owed by 21,000 people, since the fees were charged almost exclusively to low-income people who could not pay them. These fees created barriers to people's re-entry and also had very low collection rates.

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