



## Video Visitations Become An Option For Inmates And Their Families

BY MIKE MOEN



Illinois prisons are integrating technology with inmate visits. This spring, some facilities will begin offering video visitations from satellite locations. Families will pay a 30-dollar fee to speak to a loved-one behind bars.

Corrections spokesman Tom Shaer says it will put less stress on those who make long trips to state prisons. But he says they are not planning to remove that option: "The Dept. of Corrections completely agrees with the absolutely high importance of in-person visits."

Shaer says the traditional option is still necessary in reforming inmates. John Maki is with the John Howard Association, a prison watchdog. He says giving families another way to connect with inmates is a good thing. But he says they worry about the potential for high fees.

"Most of the ones who have someone in jail are exceedingly poor and that's not something I think that Illinois should be doing."

The corrections department defends the planned fee, saying they need a way to pay for the service without turning to taxpayers. They also say it's less than what other programs have charged, and that families will still save a lot of money. **(Another report follows; please see next page.)**

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Illinois prisons will soon offer video visitations for inmates. A watchdog says it could be beneficial. But it has concerns about how the trend is playing out in county jails.

By the spring, the Illinois Department of Corrections hopes to roll out the option at some of its correctional centers. Instead of traveling great lengths to visit a loved one behind bars, a person could instead head to a satellite location and speak to the inmate through a video screen. Tom Shaer is a Department of Corrections spokesman. He says it puts less stress on families who make the trip.

"It can end up saving them hundreds, if not thousands of dollars," Shaer said.

Shaer stresses that this is not a substitute for in-person visits, which he says are very meaningful for inmates. Supporters also say the video option creates greater efficiencies for the prisons.

John Maki is with the John Howard Association. He says it is a great tool for state facilities. But he worries that in some cases, county jails may want to make it the only option.

"Some are considering it as a replacement, and that's problematic," Maki said.

For example, Kane County now only offers virtual visitation at its jail. Maki says you can't replace in-person visits. He says you can only add options.

Meanwhile, inmate advocates say they also worry that fees won't be kept in check, making it hard for families to afford such a visit. For its part, the state says its expected fee of \$30 is still cost prohibitive, and is less than what other programs have charged.