



Lehigh County
Pennsylvania

OFFICE OF THE CONTROLLER

Mark Pinsley, MBA Thomas Grogan, CPA
COUNTY CONTROLLER DEPUTY CONTROLLER

March 5, 2020

Phillips Armstrong
Lehigh County Executive
17 S. 7th Street
Allentown, PA 18101

Dear County Executive Armstrong,

Lehigh County provides telephone service to inmates by arranging an exclusive agreement with a third-party provider. Using a third party reduces the burden to Lehigh County by having an expert organization that understands the requirements of the department of corrections to operate the phones so that inmates can make calls.

In December of 2019, Lehigh County entered into a new Agreement. Through successful negotiations, the administration was able to increase the amount of the guaranteed commission paid to the county by the third-party provider. The terms of the Agreement are covered by a confidentiality clause, which Law has advised precludes the discussion of specifics. While I disagree with the application of the confidentiality clause here, I would like to recognize that the amount of the increase negotiated by the Director of Corrections will provide additional revenue to the jail in excess of \$225,000. This revenue was not anticipated in the 2020 budget.

The research on the subject of inmate calls is clear, that contact with families during incarceration is closely associated with a more successful reentry and a reduction in reoffending. Moreover, sociological research has shown that incarceration has a particularly devastating impact on the children of those imprisoned. The ability of children to remain in contact with their loved ones is paramount to them navigating the detention of their parent.¹

The men and women jailed already faced enormous social and economic challenges resulting from their time behind bars. They'll enter the workforce with limited employment opportunities and the perpetual stigma of being formally jailed.

We should be committed to strengthening the process of rehabilitation not complicating it further through cost prohibitive practices that threaten to isolate prisoners from their loved ones when they need them most.





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I'm calling on the county to direct this additional **unbudgeted** revenue back into efforts to aid those held in the county jail. It's imperative that the county use these funds to either reduce the cost of calls to inmates or provide additional assistance. We should under no circumstances become reliant on this money as a source of general revenue.

The county could also consider using these funds to invest in preventative measures that reduce the likelihood of incarceration and violence in our communities. The scourge of violence, particularly which afflicts our inner-city communities has had a devastating impact on families and neighborhoods. It undermines faith in local institutions and imperils the safety of neighborhoods. Fortunately, a wealth of academic literature has risen to justify treating violence and crime within the community as an epidemic rather than as random events.

The Cure Violence model which calls on intercepting the likelihood of violence through intervention is highly successful. It has reduced incidents of violence in the community and therefore reduced the number of people coming through the criminal justice system. ⁱⁱ

We are just now as a society beginning to rectify our history of mass incarceration and acknowledge the many difficulties faced by our formerly incarcerated community. Let us take this moment to acknowledge that in matters of rehabilitation the incentive should never be the pursuit of greater revenue, but rather a more holistic and compassionate process of restoration of those who find themselves behind bars.

We have a unique opportunity among the counties of Pennsylvania to set a precedent for investing in our incarcerated communities.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Pinsley".

Sincerely,
Mark Pinsley
Lehigh County Controller

CC: Lehigh County Board of Commissioners
Edward Hozza, Jr., Director of Administration





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****The opinions expressed are my own and the comments are not a result of an audit performed by the office of the controller under the generally accepted Government Auditing Standards (GAGAS)****

ⁱ Murphey, David, and P Mae Cooper. "Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to Their Children?" ChildTrends.org, October 2015, 1–22. <https://doi.org/https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015-42ParentsBehindBars.pdf>.

Gifford EJ, Eldred Kopeck L, Glinka M, et al. Association of Parental Incarceration with Psychiatric and Functional Outcomes of Young Adults. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2019;2(8): e1910005. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.10005

Ryan Shahan, Sandra Villalobos Aludel. 2012. The Family and Recidivism. Report, Vera Institute of Justice, 1-5. Accessed January 24, 2020. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/vera/the-family-and-recidivism.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Roman, Caterina. Quasi-Experimental Designs for Community-Level Public Health Violence Reduction Interventions: A Case Study in the Challenges of Selecting the Counterfactual. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 2017, pp. 1–53, Quasi-Experimental Designs for Community-Level Public Health Violence Reduction Interventions: A Case Study in the Challenges of Selecting the Counterfactual.

