

Los Angeles County makes inmate phone calls free starting Dec. 1

By [Keri Blakinger](#) Staff Writer Nov. 21, 2023 4:28 PM PT



People incarcerated in the Los Angeles County jails will be able to call home for free starting Dec. 1, after county supervisors approved amending the existing phone contract.

(Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

Two years after promising to make phone calls free for people inside the county's seven jails, on Tuesday the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors finally approved a contract that will get it done.

Starting Dec. 1, more than 12,000 inmates will be able to call home for free.

The five supervisors unanimously voted without discussion to amend the

existing phone contract, shifting the financial burden of the calls from inmates and their families to a pot of money known as the Inmate Welfare Fund. Previously, the proceeds of the high-priced jail calls went into the Inmate Welfare Fund, which under state law is supposed to be used mainly for the benefit and education of inmates.

In recent years, that fund grew to a [balance of more than \\$32 million](#) as revenues — both from phone calls and inmate commissary purchases — outpaced expenditures. [Under the new contract arrangement](#), up to \$12.9 million per year will come out of that fund to pay for phone calls.

At Tuesday's board meeting, several advocates and formerly incarcerated community members voiced support for the new phone plan during public comments.

"I really applaud the board," said Kent G. Mendoza-Morales, associate director of local policy at the Anti-Recidivism Coalition. "It's official."

Earlier this year, [Mendoza-Morales told The Times](#) how his mother used to "sell stuff in alleys" to help pay for phone calls and food from the commissary. On Tuesday, he thanked the supervisors for approving the contract change, adding that "being in communication with your family is one of the most crucial things you can have" in jail.

In a statement Tuesday afternoon, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department celebrated the change as well, saying the amended contract would save families millions of dollars every year.

"We anticipate that free phone calls will increase the communication between inmates and their families, which can aid in rehabilitation, strengthen relationships and assist in a smoother transition when the inmate is released from custody," the statement said. "While the Sheriff's Department is committed to providing improved inmate services, it has concerns about the implementation details of this program."

The statement did not offer details about those concerns.

The board began seriously discussing a shift to free phone calls in 2021, with [a pair of motions](#) asking the county's chief executive office to explore how much it would cost and what funding source should cover it. At that point, county audits show, phone revenues were bringing in about \$15 million per year.

That money went into the Inmate Welfare Fund, along with \$20 million to \$30 million per year from commissary sales. Typically, the county spent between \$9 million and \$20 million of the fund on programs and an additional \$5 million to \$14 million on facility maintenance.

In April, lawyers targeted the high price of phone calls and commissary items in jails across the [state and sued several counties](#) — including Los Angeles. They alleged the charges amounted to an unlawful tax levied on the county's poorest residents. The lawsuit also alleged that the money has been spent on "general jails issues," including salaries and office furniture, rather than services that benefit inmates. The case is still pending.

Nationally, the average jail charges about \$3 for a 15-minute phone call, according to the Prison Policy Initiative. In California that figure is slightly lower, about \$2 per call — still an impossible cost for some inmates and their families.

When the supervisors took up the issue in July, several indicated they felt it was the county's duty to cover the cost of the calls — but it wasn't immediately clear what funds they could use. At the time, the county's chief executive officer estimated that providing free calls would cost about \$30 million per year: \$15 million to cover the the calls and another \$15 million to pay for programs currently being funded by the call revenue.

The contract that supervisors approved Tuesday will come in at least \$2 million under that, though it could be even less depending on how much phone time inmates use. Under the new plan, the county will be billed a maximum of 4.2 cents per minute when the monthly call volumes are under 9.5 million minutes

and a minimum of 2.8 cents per minute when the call volumes are over 22.9 million minutes per month.

[The contract](#) also includes free phone time for [several hundred](#) youths in custody of the county's Probation Department. It maxes out at just under \$13 million per year, bringing the total impact on county finances to about \$28 million.

Bianca Tylek, executive director of the criminal justice advocacy group Worth Rises, said in an interview that she was "thrilled to finally see Los Angeles follow through with a proposal they passed two years ago."

But she went on to add concerns about the per-minute costs to the county, which she said are higher than in [many other jurisdictions](#). A 15-minute call in Los Angeles will cost the county between 42 and 63 cents. A letter Worth Rises sent to the county says a 15-minute call in Mississippi is 60 cents, while in Maryland it is 45 cents and in Illinois is just 14 cents.

"It's one of the worst free phone call contracts that we've seen," Tylek told The Times. "There's no reason for them to be paying this much at all. It's not actually this expensive to do. It's only expensive if you poorly negotiate your contract."

Times staff writer Rebecca Ellis contributed to this report.