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Westmoreland County libraries help inmates keep in touch with loved ones

By [Renatta Signorini](#)

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Warden John Walton had a problem.

He was fielding complaints about a new video visitation program for inmates at the Westmoreland County jail that cut back on in-person visits. And fewer people than he anticipated were ponying up \$15 to chat via video, money that was expected to pay for the \$95,000 computer program.

Then he had what he believed was a novel idea.

Why not utilize computers at the county's libraries for inmates' families and friends to have video visits with them?

Adams Memorial Library in Latrobe and Peoples Library in New Kensington will be the first to participate in the program, hopefully addressing complaints by some that they couldn't participate in the visits because they didn't own a computer, couldn't afford a web camera or didn't have high-speed Internet service.

"These are people who need the library the most," said Tracy Trotter, director of Adams Memorial. "Why wouldn't we help them? This is a service we can provide."

Walton outlined the pilot program to the county board that oversees the jail on Tuesday, calling it a way to reach more family members of inmates while addressing concerns of those who pay for a 25-minute video conference over a secure, Internet-based computer program.

Making the video visits available in the county's libraries is "out of the ordinary," but the concept fits in with their evolution to remain a community resource, said Cesare Muccari, executive director of Westmoreland Federated Library System.

Muccari said he knows of no other libraries that are host to such a program. American Library Association officials said they hadn't heard of a library system offering inmate video visitation.

"With technology the way it's going, it doesn't surprise me one bit," Muccari said. "I was very receptive to it.

"It helps out, obviously, the inmate's families because if you're at a distance ... you don't have to come all the way (to Hempfield Township) to have contact," he said.

For inmates' relatives who live in the Alle-Kiski Valley, it can be difficult and time-consuming to get to the Hempfield jail for in-person visits, said Peoples Library director David Hrivnak. A long bus ride to the prison may leave little time for an actual visit, he said.

"Libraries are doing more and more to try to embrace individuals in a way that people don't normally think of libraries," Hrivnak said. "We're trying to be a resource and be an asset."

In January, jail officials initially allowed inmates to have up to three in-person visits weekly in addition to video sessions. The number of weekly in-person visits was reduced to one in June. Two video visits per week are allowed, using nine computer terminals available at the jail.

The jail averages 100 video visits monthly and has netted \$7,000 from the program, Walton said.

Initial predictions put revenue from the program at as much as \$430,000 over five years.

"We thought our numbers would be a lot higher," Walton said later Tuesday. "It's not anywhere near what we want it to be."

The warden said he hopes the program will be "up and working" by the end of August at the Latrobe library.

Adams Memorial plans to have visits available on Fridays when the facility is normally closed to the public, but staffers are on-site, Trotter said.

Technology upgrades will be made on two computers and the visits will be done consecutively, she said.

"If we find that it's successful ... we could expand it beyond there," she said.

The county commissioners liked Walton's idea.

Commissioner Charles Anderson said the video option cuts down on the risk of contraband making its way into the jail. In turn, the libraries would get more traffic.

Commissioner Ted Kopas noted that video visits are a "significant change" for inmates and their families.

"I think that we should be looking for easier ways for people to visit their loved ones," he said.

While new programs take time to work properly, Commissioner Tyler Courtney said the long-term benefit could be lower costs for the jail.

The pilot libraries are working on setting up technology and how to handle the visits, the directors said.

"Any time you do something like this, you're going to run into problems," Muccari said. "If you deal with one or two initially, you can deal with the bugs ... and then other libraries can go in."

County libraries "are experimenting with a lot of different things in terms of bringing our services to our members," he said. "This is another one of those possibilities."

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