



THE FINANCIAL
JUSTICE PROJECT
SAN FRANCISCO

PEOPLE OVER PROFITS

A Truly Free, No Cost Tablet
Program for Incarcerated
People in San Francisco



MAY 2023

Executive Summary



In May 2023, **the City and County of San Francisco launched the nation's first tablet program that is completely free, with no hidden costs, to all people incarcerated in the local jails.**

Through this tablet program, every incarcerated person in the San Francisco jails has access to a tablet where every service is free. At no cost to them or their family, people can participate in educational and well-being programs, prepare for reentry by searching for job listings and housing, access important legal resources, make commissary orders and medical requests, and submit grievances. **They also have free access to e-books, audiobooks, movies, and music provided through a first-of-its-kind collaboration with the San Francisco Public Library.**

Providing a free tablet with a range of free features is a new model for jails and prisons across the country. Tablets are often utilized in jails, prisons, and other carceral settings to generate revenue from incarcerated individuals and their families. These devices provide access to movies, e-books, and video call services, but the high prices charged for these services make them unaffordable for many. Incarcerated people can be [charged](#) up to \$1.25 for each email or electronic message sent and received, up to \$1.00 per minute for a video call, and up to \$25 to watch a movie. **These high costs are typically borne not by incarcerated people themselves, who make little to no income while incarcerated, but rather are paid by people's families, most of whom have low incomes and are people of color.**

Providing free tablets to all incarcerated people lifts a financial burden off of them and their families, advances racial and economic equity, and ensures all incarcerated people have free and equitable access to reentry resources. Through the involvement of the San Francisco Public Library, incarcerated people experience access to free educational and entertainment media that encourage learning, reflection, and dreaming that are vital to a meaningful life.

The free tablet for all incarcerated people was made possible through a unique collaboration between the San Francisco Mayor's Office, Sheriff's Office, Public Library, The Financial Justice Project in the Treasurer's Office, and the San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition, a coalition of organizations supporting currently and formerly incarcerated people. The free tablet builds on several previous [reforms](#) in San Francisco to eliminate the high costs of incarceration, including making jail phone calls free and eliminating price markups in the jail store, commonly known as commissary.

We are proud of this first-in-the-nation reform in San Francisco and hope that this issue brief will be helpful to other jurisdictions that aim to eliminate the high costs of incarceration for families and incarcerated people.

1 The Problem with High-Priced Tablets for Incarcerated People



A \$1.4 billion jail and prison telecommunications industry profits off incarcerated people and their families.

Across the country, it is common for jails and prisons, and the corporations that they contract with, to charge people high prices for many necessities while they are incarcerated, including high per-minute costs for phone and video calls, upcharges on food and hygiene purchases from the jail store or commissary, medical and dental co-pays, and other fees for booking, uniforms, etc. These high costs generate significant profits and revenue for the corporations that provide these services. Jails and prisons typically get a cut of the profits, creating additional incentives to upcharge services and basic necessities to those who can least afford it. The jail and prison telecommunications industry alone has grown to over [\\$1.4 billion](#), dominated by just two corporations.

People's families and support networks pay the price.

Because incarcerated people make little to no money while incarcerated, these high costs are primarily paid by family members who are supporting their loved ones inside. These costs are a significant drain on low-income communities of color. [Research](#) from the Ella Baker Center shows that women, usually women of color, shoulder the bulk of the costs. Two out of five Black women are related to someone who is incarcerated. One-third of families with an incarcerated loved one go into debt paying these high costs, according to the report.

High-priced tablets are proliferating in jails and prisons across the country.

In recent years, many jails and prisons have increasingly introduced tablets in facilities. These tablets have offered private corporations a new way to generate millions of dollars in additional revenue, which comes out of the pockets of incarcerated people and their families. Just two corporations dominate this market—ViaPath (formerly GTL and GlobalTelLink) and Securus (which owns the tablet company, JPay) control [82 percent](#) of the market. While there has been more scrutiny in recent years on the high cost of jail and prison phone calls that has pushed prices down, these tablet providers and their profiteering remain unregulated.

“ *This is an important enhancement to our justice system that will help continue our reform work that eliminates the high costs of incarceration, including something as simple as making a phone call from jail. People in our jail system should have access to technology resources that afford them the opportunity to develop new skills and stay connected while they serve their time.*”

SAN FRANCISCO MAYOR LONDON N. BREED

To be clear, there is strong demand for tablets from incarcerated people. Tablets offer a convenient way for people to keep in touch with their families and loved ones through messages and calls. The entertainment options—access to books, movies, games, and music—also provide a way for people to learn, alleviate boredom, access new perspectives

on the world, and get through their period of incarceration. Tablets became even more widely used and popular during the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person visiting and programming were suspended, and people were confined to their cells for most of the day.

“With help from our City partners, we have been able to build up this program, to offer a broad range of free media that has never been afforded to people in any jail, and will take the financial burden off of incarcerated people’s families. This is ultimately about reducing recidivism and bolstering crime prevention. Giving people the tools they need in order to learn and access media can be a motivating factor as they look toward a life beyond jail.”

SAN FRANCISCO SHERIFF PAUL MIYAMOTO

Typical Costs of For-Profit Tablets in other Jails and Prisons

Incarcerated people often must purchase tablets, for prices as high as \$140 per tablet, in order to use them. While some carceral facilities provide the tablets themselves for “free,” there are numerous per use charges that add up. Incarcerated people and their families report paying over \$1,000 per month to use tablets. These can include:

- **E-Books:** ViaPath (formerly GTL) was found to charge people in West Virginia prisons \$0.03 per minute to read an e-book, which is particularly harmful for people with low literacy levels or learning disorders. In the outside world, anyone with a library card can borrow an e-book for free and have access to thousands of titles through their local library.
- **Entertainment (Music, Movies, Television Shows):** Renting a movie can cost up to \$25; listening to music can cost \$2.50 per song, all the way up to \$46 for an album. On the outside, people can access hundreds of millions of songs

and podcasts through Spotify for free or buy a premium subscription for just \$10 per month or pay \$15 per month to watch thousands of movies and television shows through Netflix.

- **Video calls:** The cost for a video call with an incarcerated family member can be as high as \$1.00 per minute, which can easily add up to \$15 to \$30 for a half hour call. This is exorbitantly higher than many free video calling services available to the public, like Zoom or FaceTime, which have become even more ubiquitous in recent years during the COVID-19 pandemic. In San Francisco jails, video calls have been free since 2020.
- **Electronic messages:** Families are charged when they buy “stamps” to send an electronic message to keep in touch with an incarcerated loved one. These “stamps” can range from \$0.05 to \$1.25 each and are more expensive for longer messages or messages with photo or video attachments. On the outside world, sending a text message or email is free and even the cost of a postal stamp in 2023 is \$0.63.

SAMPLE COSTS OF TRADITIONAL FOR-PROFIT TABLET FEATURES



\$25

Movie Rental



\$2.50

per song

Music



\$1.00

per minute

Video Call



\$0.05 to

\$1.25 each

Electronic Message

② San Francisco's Truly Free, No Cost Tablet Program



Why did San Francisco pursue a free tablet program?

The City and County of San Francisco has implemented many [reforms](#) to eliminate the high costs of incarceration in San Francisco, including [making jail phone calls free](#) in 2020, eliminating commissary markups in 2020, and creating a [commissary allowance program](#) for indigent incarcerated people in 2021. In 2020, the City and County of San Francisco unanimously passed the [People Over Profits ordinance](#), which prevents the City from making revenue from incarcerated people and their families.

Building off these reforms, when the City and County of San Francisco moved forward with implementing a tablet program, all government and community stakeholders agreed that any tablet program would be provided at no-cost to incarcerated people and their families. Rather than relying on revenue generated from incarcerated people and their



Available on the Tablet: *Getting Out & Staying Out* which provides resources to navigate reentry in San Francisco

“Public libraries are for everybody in our community. That’s why we are so pleased with this partnership to bring free tablets and streaming books, music, movies and more, to those residing in our county jails. These individuals are the most vulnerable in our community, and most in need of access to high quality collections for recreation, cultural enrichment, and education. I hope this effort sparks other municipalities to expand their public library resources to justice-involved individuals. We know that the transformational power of reading can really change lives.”

MICHAEL LAMBERT,
SAN FRANCISCO CITY LIBRARIAN

families, the Mayor’s Office committed to provide \$500,000 annually in general funds, to support the implementation and maintenance of the tablet program. Through a [request for proposal](#) process, the Sheriff’s Office entered into a [contract](#) with [Nucleos](#) as the tablet provider. Nucleos is a company that supports digital education and vocational training programming in jails and prisons.

How did San Francisco develop and implement the tablet program?

A unique partnership with the San Francisco Public Library made it possible to provide books, movies, and music on the tablets at no cost to incarcerated people.

An important partnership with the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) allows for a robust library of e-books, audiobooks, movies, television shows,



Available on the Tablet: E-books and audiobooks provided by the Public Library

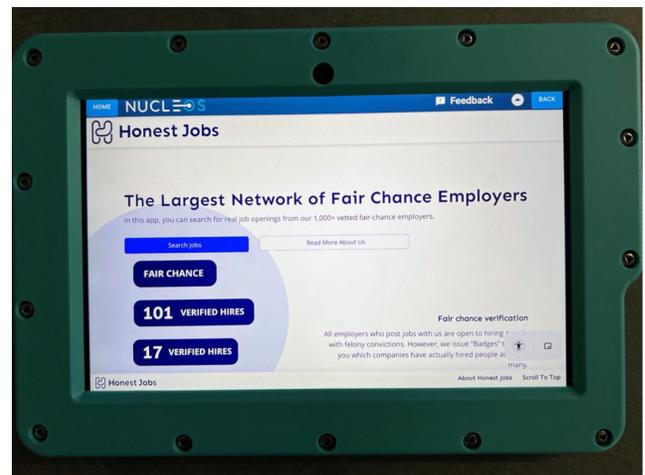
and music to be provided on the tablets at no-cost to incarcerated people. These same resources are available to any Public Library cardholder. Leveraging this existing resource and infrastructure extends this access to incarcerated people in San Francisco and is a first-in-the-nation model.

The Public Library leverages a platform called [hoopla Digital](#) to provide e-books, audiobooks, movies, music, and e-learning to incarcerated people through the tablet, sometimes purchasing licenses for specific use by the incarcerated population. This platform provides materials in multiple languages. These collections are frequently updated, and the platform can make recommendations based on past viewing or reading history. The Public Library curates content and materials provided through the tablet to meet parameters set forth by the Sheriff's Office.

In addition to the tablet, the SFPL librarians continue to provide services in the jails, bringing incarcerated people physical books on a weekly basis. Due to varied levels of digital literacy, some incarcerated people are more comfortable with continuing to use paper forms and physical books, which is one reason they are still being provided. Tablets can also help increase the digital literacy that is necessary for successfully navigating an increasingly online world; investing in the tablets is also an investment in people's ability to search for and retrieve information, complete forms, navigate user interfaces.

Community groups and formerly incarcerated people contributed to the design of the tablet program.

The San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition was a key partner in the design of the tablet program. The coalition is composed of community-based organizations, formerly incarcerated people, and family members who are supporting incarcerated loved ones. At every step of the way, the SF Jail Justice Coalition provided recommendations on the types of resources that they wanted to see on the tablet, including reentry and educational resources. Including community members through this process was and is important to ensure that the tablets continue to meet the needs of our incarcerated population.



Available on the Tablet: Access to fair chance job opportunities and employers

What services are available on the tablet?

The Tablet includes communications features, educational and reentry resources, entertainment options, and access to jail services.

Every incarcerated person has access to a tablet and may access the tablet at no cost to them and their families. Access is available in multiple languages. Features include:

Tablet Features



COMMUNICATIONS to ensure incarcerated people can stay in touch with their loved ones:

- **Electronic messaging** allowing incarcerated people to communicate with Sheriff's Office staff and program staff
- **Video conferencing** through Zoom that incarcerated people can use to participate in educational programming, mental well-being, and religious activities



EDUCATIONAL AND REENTRY RESOURCES, many of which were recommended for inclusion by community groups.

- **Educational classes and programs**, such as Khan Academy, Canvas, and Essential Ed
- **Legal resources**, such as access to LexisNexis, the Law Library, family law and immigration resources
- **English as a Second Language (ESL) courses**
- **Resources about pretrial rights and post-conviction rights**
- **Reentry guides**, such as [Getting Out and Staying Out](#), [Roadmap to Reentry](#), and service provider directories
- **Workforce development and employment resources**, including a vocational app for

food safety training and certification, resume building resources, and a job search platform

- **Housing resources**
- **Health resources**
- **Parenting classes and resources**



ENTERTAINMENT

- **E-books**
- **Audiobooks**
- **Movies**
- **Television shows**
- **Music streaming**
- **Games**



JAIL SERVICES: The Sheriff's Office was excited to digitize and streamline formerly paper processes and services through the tablet program.

- **Commissary ordering**
- **Grievance filing**
- **Medical requests**
- **Administrative forms**

While many services are now available on the tablet, this additional access is meant to complement, not replace or lessen, critical in-person services. The Sheriff's Office and all stakeholders recognize the importance of in-person visits, in-person programming, and the provision of physical books and other reading materials and forms. In no way does the tablet program aim to replace these important in-person programs and features.

3 Recommendations for Other Localities Pursuing a Truly Free Tablet Program



1. Partner with the local library. Libraries across the country provide residents with free access to a large selection of e-books, movies, music, and educational databases and resources. Connecting local library resources to incarcerated people, who are also residents, can help ensure that a tablet program can be implemented without high prices for books and entertainment.

“*Supposedly ‘free’ tablets too often cost incarcerated people and their families a fortune. The tablets are loaded up with charges like \$10 to watch a movie or three cents a minute to read an e-book. Private corporations and government split the profits, while incarcerated people’s grandmothers are socked with a bill they can’t afford. I’m proud of our collaboration with the SF Public Library and the SF Sheriff’s Office to create a completely free tablet that is an innovative model for jails and prisons across the country.*”

SAN FRANCISCO TREASURER JOSÉ CISNEROS

2. Engage community groups and incarcerated people. Close partnerships with the community who called for a free tablet program was central to the success of this program. The Sheriff’s Office and The Financial Justice Project worked closely with formerly incarcerated people and community groups that support currently and formerly incarcerated people to hear about what types of resources would be most beneficial to the incarcerated population.

“*One of the most serious challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic was social isolation within the jails. Suddenly without notice, there were no more family visits and all programming came to a halt. Introducing tablets builds on the People Over Profits Ordinance and serves as a remedy to enable communication, allow visitation, and access higher education at no cost to incarcerated people and their families.*”

PAUL BRILEY, REGIONAL CHAPTER COORDINATOR, ALL OF US OR NONE AND LEGAL SERVICES FOR PRISONERS WITH CHILDREN

3. Issue a request for proposals that is truly no cost. The Sheriff’s Office issued a [request for proposals](#) (RFP) that required bidders to propose a tablet program that is truly no cost to incarcerated people and their families. The RFP also included a provision that the provider must partner with our Public Library.

4. Tablets should not replace existing services. There has been a trend in many jails and prisons to eliminate other critical services following the introduction of tablet programs, like eliminating physical books in favor of e-books, eliminating in-person visiting in favor of video calls. Tablets should be used to complement these other important services and programs to allow for a diverse set of ways for incarcerated people to communicate with their loved ones or access educational opportunities.

4 Conclusion



We are proud of this effort to ensure that incarcerated people can access important resources through this new tablet program and that San Francisco continues to reduce the high costs of incarceration on incarcerated people and their families. We hope that other cities, counties, and states will consider implementing similar reforms in their jurisdictions.

Thank you to our partners in the San Francisco Mayor's Office, Sheriff's Office, Public Library, and the San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition for their continued commitment and support to eliminate the high costs of incarceration and advance racial and economic equity in our city.

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For more information, please visit
The Financial Justice Project website at
sfgov.org/financialjustice.

May 2023

“ If my loved one who is currently incarcerated in another county had access to a free tablet, it would be extremely valuable as it would require less funds than what I currently contribute towards paying tablet fees and fees for access to movies, messages, picture images, etc. Not to mention it may help him learn to navigate a newer electronic device that he hasn't had access to in the past. By offering these devices for free, it is a huge benefit to spare these financial responsibilities from family members or the incarcerated person who may not have the means.”

**VALENTINA SEDENO, PROGRAM MANAGER,
YOUNG COMMUNITY DEVELOPERS**

“ We are so thrilled to see San Francisco continuing the work to make critical products and services free to incarcerated people and their families. Every jurisdiction could learn from the groundbreaking work the county is doing to ensure incarcerated people are connected to their support systems, have an opportunity to learn and prepare for their reentry, and are protected from the predatory practices of opportunistic corporations with weak moral compasses. This truly free tablet program will be life changing for those incarcerated in San Francisco and help them come home and stay home to the benefit of all San Francisco residents.”

**BIANCA TYLEK,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT WORTH RISES**

Acknowledgements



The San Francisco Jail Justice Coalition called for these reforms and advocated for them every step of the way. The organizations include:

All of Us or None

GLIDE

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

San Francisco Pretrial Diversion Project

San Francisco Public Defender's Office

Taxpayers for Public Safety

Young Community Developers

Young Women's Freedom Center

“ At Nucleos, we fully support the free tablet model, as it aligns with our mission to provide accessible education and rehabilitation resources to incarcerated individuals. By utilizing local public library resources, supporting learning models for both digital and in-person instruction, and offering our platform to a wider audience, we can make a significant impact on reducing recidivism rates and improving post-release outcomes.”

NOAH FREEDMAN, CEO, NUCLEOS

“ Five Keys is a high school inside the jails that supports people to get their diploma while incarcerated. The tablets have been so helpful because we can message students directly and communicate much faster to answer questions.”

TERESE BRAVO, PRINCIPAL, FIVE KEYS SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS
