

## PHOENIX

At Maricopa County's two newest jails, video is the only way to visit. While some call it impersonal, officials say the virtual visits with handsets and video screens make visits safer and allow more frequent ones.

"It's a good, good morale booster on both sides of the fence," Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio said. "You shouldn't penalize the family who want to visit." Arpaio said the new system has reduced wait time for visits from several hours to mere minutes, as inmates no longer have to be escorted by detention officers to visiting areas with limited seating. Because inmates hook up in their housing units, it cuts down on movement, reduces the number of assaults and eliminates opportunities for contraband to be smuggled into jails. Even though touching and hand-holding was never allowed, some families bemoan the loss of personal contact.

To Beverly Kelley of Glendale, who visited her son, Kurt, at the jail, it wasn't the same. During their 30-minute visit, Kelley had to keep asking Kurt to look up so she could see his eyes. "I would have rather seen him in person," Kelley said, but "it's better than nothing." Still, she was relieved to see he "looked good" after six months in jail, that he "doesn't look beat up. I worry about that."

There are 126 booths for visitors, spread over the three facilities, and 280 for inmates. Each station costs up to \$4,000 and is paid for from a one-fifth cent sales tax voters approved for jails in 1998 and extended for 20 more years in 2002.

With more than 10,700 jail inmates in Maricopa County and an average of 12,000 visitors monthly, Arpaio said he'd like to see home-based visitation within the next year.

The technology is slowly spreading in Maricopa County, with public defenders, probation officers and even some criminal attorneys getting access in their offices over the next six months.

And what's happening here could become the norm across the country in coming years as jails and prisons increasingly embrace video visitation as a smart management policy. Such video encounters eventually could take place from the comfort of home, virtually revolutionizing visitation as we know it. All that would be needed in the home is a Web cam, a microphone and a computer with a broadband Internet connection. If it happens, it would be the first program of its kind in the country to hook up private homes and jails, Arpaio said. "It's the right thing to do," Arpaio said. "The kids can get on and talk to their father. Arpaio said he is also considering regional visitation centers and Pinal County officials also are looking toward satellite visitation centers.

The Arizona Department of Corrections uses video hookups at its Tucson and Alhambra prisons to connect visitors to inmates housed at facilities in other states. And Pinal County expects to have the technology in its current jail by the end of the year. It will allow inmates to have 30 minutes of visitation daily instead of 20 to 30 minutes a week, said

Terry Altman, chief deputy for detention at the Pinal County Sheriff's Office, said currently, more than 700 inmates use eight in-person visiting booths. "Maintaining contact with the outside world is critically important while they're in here," Altman said. "It allows them to feel they have some influence and some connection with their families."