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ALBEMARLE-CHARLOTTESVILLE REGIONAL JAIL

# Charlottesville's jail is preparing for a pricey renovation. The cost of life behind bars isn't cheap either.

Luke Fountain Aug 11, 2023 0



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A flake of blue paint flutters and falls from the bars of the jail cell door as it swings open with a clang.

Inside, two metal bunks along the wall dominate the cramped 5-by-7 room.

It's summer, and it is nearly as hot inside as it is outside. The cell has not had air conditioning since it was constructed 48 years ago.



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The sound of dripping water from a showerhead at the end of the cell block ticks off the seconds like a clock. During the winter, the water is kept on all day to keep inmates warm. There has never been heating, either.

There are no ramps and only a single grab bar by a single toilet in the entire facility. The building has never complied with the Americans with Disabilities Act — it doesn't have to under Virginia law.

Above the bars, scrawled on the wall in pencil are the words: "The s--tshack."

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A cell in the old wing of the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail is seen on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.

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This is a cell block at the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail.

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In the words of Jesse Crosson, “It is the worst experience of your life.”

Crosson would know. He was behind bars there for almost a year after he was arrested on robbery, gun and drug charges in 2002.

The conditions he faced there have by and large remained unchanged since he was released two years ago, said Crosson, who now regularly returns to the jail as a volunteer to mentor inmates.

On a recent tour of the jailhouse, The Daily Progress confirmed that.



The Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail is seen on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023.

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But changes are coming, according to the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail Authority.

The jail is in the early stages of an overhaul of the oldest part of the structure built on top of a landfill in 1974 — and not renovated once — that will cost nearly \$49 million and last through late 2025.

The newer parts of the facility, built in 2000, will not be touched other than a fresh coat of paint.

“With the renovations, I think we are taking a major step to increasing the quality of life for inmates, and I am looking forward to them,” the jail’s superintendent, Martin Kumer, told The Daily Progress.

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Renovations have been long delayed because the jail has been chronically overcrowded for years. The inmate population has decreased by more than half since Kumer started 26 years ago.



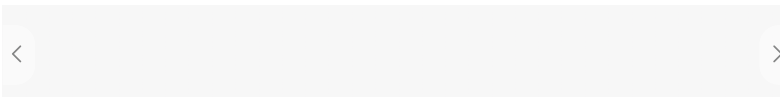
Martin Kumer, superintendent of the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail, stands in the old wing of the jail on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.  
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“We have the lowest population I’ve seen at around 270 inmates,” Kumer said. “We’ve maintained that now for almost three years now. We couldn’t renovate in the past because we were so overpopulated that we didn’t have anywhere for the inmates in the old wing to go in the meantime while we renovated.”

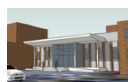
While the planned improvements will not increase capacity, Kumer noted, they will provide more, and better, mental health care units: designed to “reduce stimulation” for inmates experiencing mental health crises or reacclimating to medication.

The improvements are about bettering conditions for everyone at the jail, Kumer said, not just inmates.

“We want to improve the overall living conditions for and working conditions for the inmates, staff and visitors,” Kumer said. “Importantly, we’re not adding any beds. We will knock down the old wing, add more mental health care, add classrooms, make trauma-enforced design, improve HVAC, plumbing and electrical and bring some of the facilities up to current codes and more.”



“I think the renovations are a great step forward, but there’s still a lot to be done,” Crosson said.



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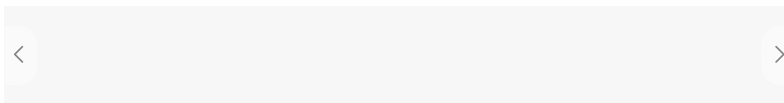
Alice Berry

One of those things is the phone contracts that often limit inmates' ability to stay in contact with the outside world, he said.

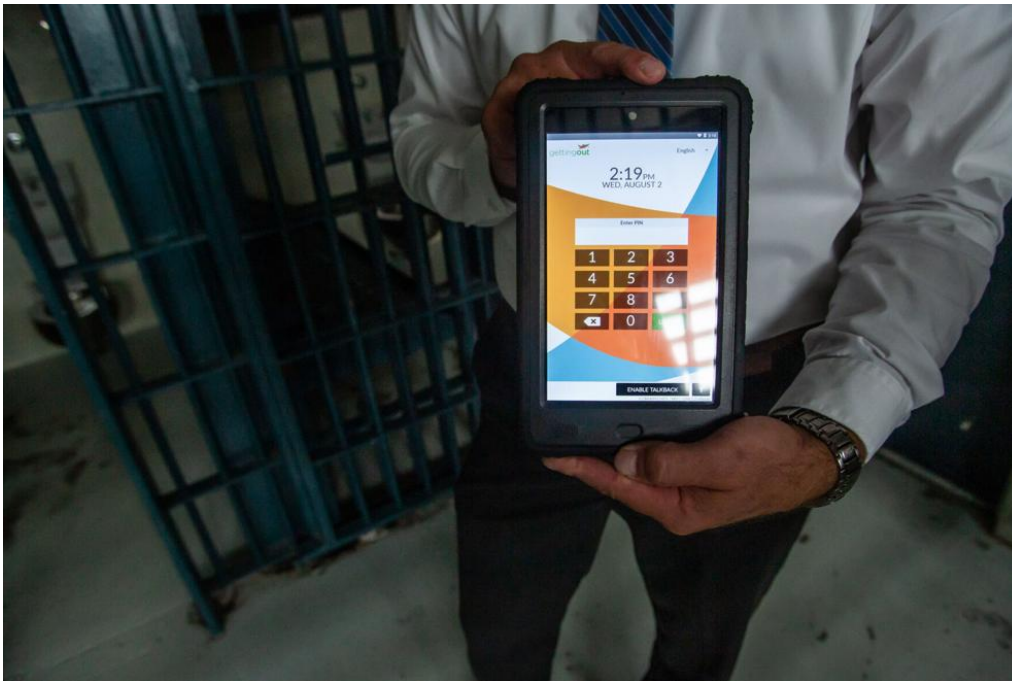
At the same time the jail is pursuing renovations, jail officials are also negotiating new phone contracts for inmates that they promise will also improve the quality of life for those behind bars. That negotiation process, though, is a more regular event, occurring every two to five years.

It cost 12 cents a minute for inmates to make phone calls. They also receive four free, 15-minute calls a month. In 2021, phone calls brought in close to \$600,000 which went directly to the jail's coffers.

"Trying to keep in touch with people outside of jail is extremely expensive," Crosson said. "For a lot of guys, they can't afford it and sometimes aren't able to wish their kids happy birthday, tell their parents they love them and miss out on life's biggest moments."



While the jailhouse still has landline phones, most inmates use tablets that are stored in each cell block. Any form of communication on those tablets, including phone calls, video calls and emails, costs inmates.



Martin Kumer, superintendent of the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail, holds up a tablet that inmates can use for phone calls on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.

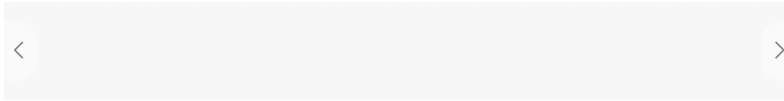
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"Our goal is always to have the lowest calling rate while maintaining a reasonable commission, and our goal has not changed with time," Kumer said.

Communications are provided by Inmate Calling Solutions LLC, one of only three providers to jails and prisons in the commonwealth of Virginia. Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail officials and lobbyists on both sides of the political aisle described the current arrangement as monopolistic.

But approaches to breaking that monopoly and what that means for inmates and jails differ.

“The way phones and other revenue sources for the jail work is inhumane. The jail profits hugely while inmates make pennies,” Shawn Weneta, a policy strategist with the American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia, told The Daily Progress.



The ACLU has been advocating for the abolition of the current system.



Holding cells in the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail are seen on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.  
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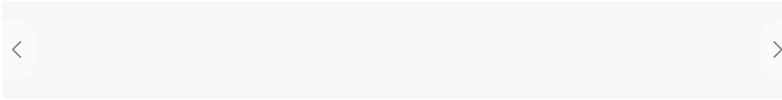
“We want to end phone contract monopolies. It’s time that phone service be free for inmates,” Weneta said.

Other groups agree that there is a monopoly and that the system unfairly profits off inmates but don’t go as far as the ACLU in advocating for free phone calls.

“There is no oversight of the commission revenue system,” Ben Knotts, the legislative director for libertarian conservative political advocacy group Americans for Prosperity Virginia, told The Daily Progress. “It remains a constant incentive for jails to increase revenue off the backs of inmates and their families, and these companies have a monopoly.”

Kumer falls more in line with that latter camp.

“My goal is to reduce costs for inmates, but it’s not going to be free,” Kumer said. “Logistically, we make money off it. It costs money to provide all those tablets and phones. Somebody’s got to pay for that.”



A holding cell in the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail seen on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023.  
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Phones aren't the only place where the jail makes money; there is also commissary.

The kitchens at the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail, staffed by roughly 15 inmates, sit in the basement of the building. It's humid, between the brown tile floors and the yellow walls it's unclear how clean or dirty the room really is and, according to Crosson, what's being prepared in the steel pots sitting on the stoves barely resembles food.

"What they would serve us, I usually wouldn't even be able to make out what the food was. It was borderline and sometimes actually inedible," Crosson said. "Many times, you'd have inmates in the kitchen helping to serve the food and they would be like, 'I don't even know what is going into these meals.'"

As a result, many inmates prefer to purchase food from the commissary. That food is not cheap; in fact, it can be double the price of what it is on the outside.

"Lots of inmates, if they had the money, would buy food from the commissary in order to not go to bed hungry," Crosson said. "A small bag of chips could run you twice the regular price."



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Commissary isn't limited to food.

"They'd give us one bar of soap for a month. That's not enough," Crosson said. "When it was time for laundry, you were lucky if you had another pair of clothes. The essentials were lacking. You'd end up having to pay for things as basic as toothpaste and a toothbrush for upwards of five dollars."

Kumer disagrees with Crosson's culinary criticism.

"You have bad food, and you've got yourself a riot," he said. "We have a chef with executive chef experience who makes food. We deviate from the state required menu a lot. We spend a little extra to provide fresh food. Our guidelines use a lot of processed and canned foods. We use more fresh and seasonal foods."

There is always going to be complaints, Kumer said.



An inmate stands in the hallway of the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.  
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"Do I want to eat cakes, chips and cookies because they taste good? Sure, I do, because I'm human. But I can't eat only that, it's a give and take. It's the same for inmates," he said. "You are always going to have somebody who doesn't like what's on their tray and somebody who doesn't like the way it was prepared. But as far as quantity, nutritional value and quality, we've always gone above and beyond."

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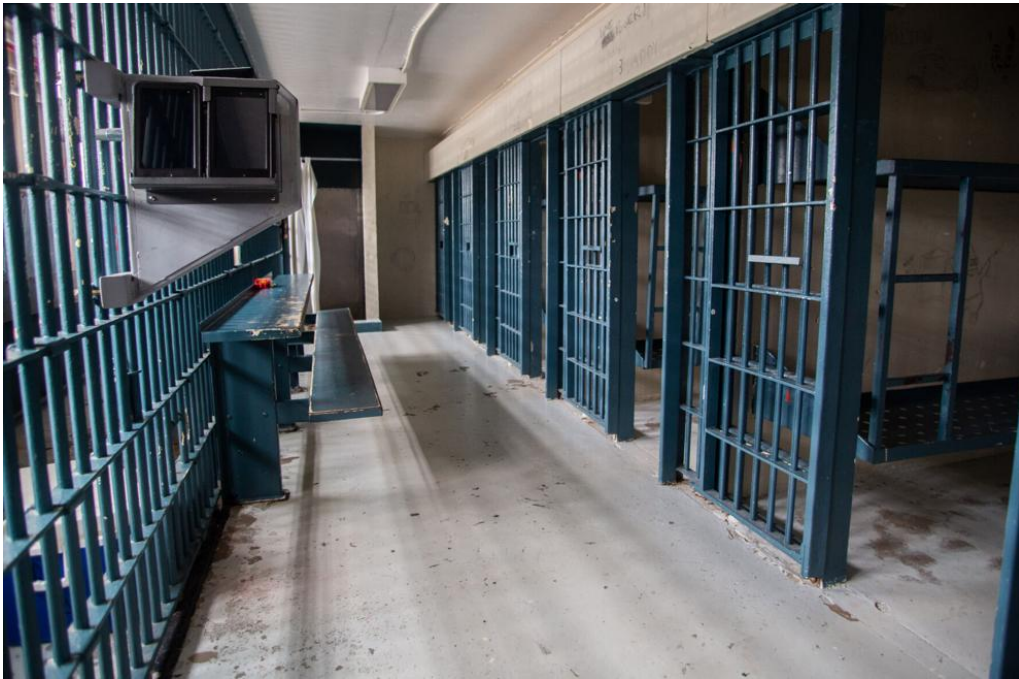
It's hard to deny the commissary isn't popular, however. According to the jail, the commissary grossed more than \$200,000 in 2021 alone.

Between commissary, phone calls and other expenses, it's costly to be incarcerated. But it's usually not the inmates who are paying.

It's their families. And oftentimes, those families don't actually have the finances to afford the costs.



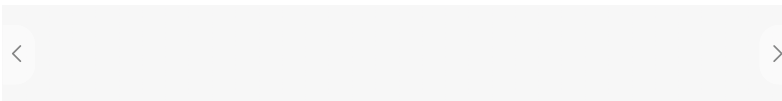
More than a third of families go into debt to cover the costs of staying in touch with an incarcerated relative, according to the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. This only creates more financial instability when an inmate is released. Inmates often are saddled with debt from fines and fees when they reenter society.



Jail cells in the old wing of the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail are seen on Wednesday, Aug. 2, 2023.  
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A report issued by the Virginia Department of Corrections in October 2022 backs this up.

“Commissary is a government mandated monopoly and is therefore not priced competitively given the lack of free market forces,” the report says. “The 9% commission collected by VADOC, in addition to high prices and sales tax, collected to fund these services places an unfair cost on some of the Commonwealth’s poorest families.”



Inmates make pennies an hour for working while in jail — work that remains legal because of a clause in the 13th Amendment:

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

Like phone contracts and commissary costs, there are those who would like to see that changed.

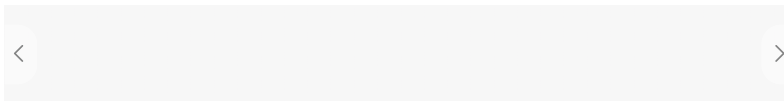


A employee at the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail pushes a cart to the entrance on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.  
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“The average inmate makes between 20 and 45 cents an hour,” Phil Wilayto, the co-founder of prison reform group Virginia Prison Justice Network, told The Daily Progress. “That is not remotely close to a living wage. The easiest way to solve it would be to amend the Constitution.”

Wilayto said that last sentence without any sense of irony. The Constitution was last amended 31 years ago. Of the 11,000-plus amendments proposed since the founding of the country, only 27 amendments have ever been ratified — two have been repealed.

Amending the Constitution to provide working inmates a living wage would also likely face pushback from those who profit from the pennies paid and the millions earned off those behind bars.



Revenue generated from phone calls and commissary adds up. A state report, which the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail contributed to, found that the jail had the second-highest revenue from commissions in the entire commonwealth, at \$1.56 million.

That report is wrong, Kumer said.



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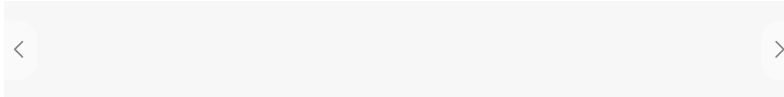
“The cost report relied upon for this information is incomplete, is absent of information, and is inaccurate. It should not be relied upon for analysis,” Kumer said in an email. “Our annual FY 2021 Audited financials list commissary canteen

commission at \$276,165 and our telephone revenue at \$500,965 for a total revenue of commissary and phones of \$777,130.”

That would mean the state report and the jail’s own numbers vary by \$783,407.

Discrepancies aside, there is widespread agreement: The costs of being locked up extend beyond the jailhouse gates.

These costs manifest themselves in a vicious cycle of recidivism. Inmates who clearly struggled to abide by the law on the outside, often struggle to find peace on the inside and struggle again once freed, making it all the more likely they wind back up in jail.



The floor in the old wing of the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail seen on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.

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“Many times, without being able to afford to stay in touch with loved ones, inmates end up falling back in with the same people that got them into jail in the first place,” Kenneth Hunter, a spokesman with prison reform group Ignite Justice and a former inmate himself, told The Daily Progress. “The systems in place to help inmates reenter society successfully usually fail. A lot of times inmates are released, and the jail does nothing more for them than say, ‘Good luck.’”

A new, and better, phone contract at the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail could be a good place to start changing that.

Studies have shown that staying in touch with loved ones while incarcerated reduces the likelihood an inmate will commit more crimes when released, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit prison reform group.

In September, bids for the new phone contracts at Charlottesville’s jail will be finalized.

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By Luke Fountain

News Intern



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