

Public paid workers' illicit telephone bills

Montgomery abuses included sex calls

By Sean Scully
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For 2½ years, Montgomery County taxpayers paid for personal telephone calls made by public employees — including lengthy calls to sex lines in the Caribbean — because an agency director did not replace broken equipment designed to prevent such abuse, The Washington Times has learned.

A machine installed a decade ago to keep track of which calls were placed on which county government telephones broke down in August 1994. But the telecommunications official in charge didn't buy a replacement until February of this year, leaving supervisors in the dark for 30 months about long-distance abuses committed on the 4,500-phone system.

The replacement machine cost \$34,000, from a county budget of \$2 billion.

"It's a disgrace," said County Council member Gail Ewing, at-large Democrat, when told of the problem. "It's far below the standards of Montgomery County."

Though it isn't clear how many personal calls by employees were covered by taxpayers — or how high that bill was — it is clear some workers abused phone privileges

during the unmonitored months.

Last July, someone placed 13 calls to a homosexual sex "hot line" based in the Caribbean and known as Man Scan, according to a spot-check by The Times of bills to the county government for international phone calls.

Those calls cost taxpayers \$222.10 in July 1996 alone, a period when county phone bills topped \$16,000 a month, compared with the first six months of 1994, when monthly bills averaged \$8,500 — before the tracking equipment shut down in August. The number for Man Scan also appears on phone bills from other months.

The Times' random check of a dozen phone numbers turned up at least one call to a sex line in the Dominican Republic, as well as a 17-minute call to a private home in Trinidad that cost \$14.08.

When a reporter called the Trinidad number, a resident who answered refused to talk about whether relatives or friends called her from Montgomery County. She suggested the caller misdialed while attempting to reach a hardware store on the Caribbean island.

see PHONE, page A10

PHONE

From page A1

Because the call-tracking equipment installed in 1987 was broken, it is impossible to determine on which phones the calls were made.

The county's phone system automatically blocks calls from its phones to the various 900-number pay services, which include sex and psychic hot lines. That safeguard was not undone by the broken equipment.

Don Evans, director of the county's Department of Information Systems and Telecommunications, defends his agency's performance. The 30-month delay stemmed not from incompetence, Mr. Evans said, but from the time-consuming demands of procurement rules and the budget process.

"We followed those processes as quickly as the system allows," said Mr. Evans, who was appointed by County Executive Douglas M. Duncan.

Mrs. Ewing scoffed at that excuse.

"Whoever the supervisor was should be called on the carpet and made to pay for that machine," the council president said.

The county's average monthly

phone bill jumped from \$8,700 to \$10,400 in the six months after the tracking system broke, before climbing to a peak of \$16,000 last summer.

Other than assigning an investigator to research every long-distance number dialed from government telephones, there is no way to know how much personal calls may have cost during the blackout, officials say.

The only mistake Mr. Evans admitted his telecommunications department had made was in not realizing the telephone-accounting system was teetering on the edge of collapse in the summer of 1994.

An extended budget crunch in the early 1990s made it impossible to fill a position with duties that included monitoring the condition of the tracking equipment, he said.

"We should have been monitoring that," Mr. Evans said. "Basically we blew it."

"At the very least that's an odd way to run a government," said Rose Crenca, a former council member who is president of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League. "It's a very odd way of spending my public funds. ... It really does indicate a lot of heel-dragging. Saving money doesn't seem to be a real high priority in some places."

Mr. Duncan, a Democrat elected three months after the equipment broke down, stands by his appointee, a spokesman said.

"I think you wouldn't find anybody in this administration who would suggest that was a reasonable amount of time to be down, but there were some extenuating circumstances," Duncan spokesman David Weaver said.

Telecommunications officials point out that phone bills fluctuate wildly, and that a surge in legitimate calls also could have driven up costs.

Mr. Evans insisted the problem will not recur, saying he has made staff changes. Even with the equipment broken, he said, staff should have caught the abuse — especially obvious patterns such as the Man Scan calls.

But an employee formerly responsible for monitoring calls disagreed, saying the telecommunications director and his assistants are to blame.

"They just didn't care" about tracking fraud and abuse, said Ana Parsons, who said she repeatedly urged that the equipment be fixed.

Mrs. Parsons, 34, has been on administrative leave from her job as a fiscal assistant since February, when she said Mr. Evans accused her of insubordination.