

Bronx Hotline Helps People Make the Right Call After an Arrest

By Ashley Southall

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For the more than 250,000 people who are arrested each year in New York City, phone calls to lawyers and loved ones can mean the difference between freedom and jail.

But when the police make arrests, they routinely confiscate cellphones, where rarely memorized contact numbers are stored, leaving those who are arrested without a way to reach out for help.

Getting in touch with a lawyer or a relative after an arrest can play a pivotal role in helping people avoid being caught in the city's bail system, which has emerged as a target of criminal justice reform as the city seeks to close the Rikers Island jail complex. Nearly 50,000 people were held in city jails before trial last year, and 72 percent were there because they could not post bail, according to the city's Independent Budget Office.

Most people who are arrested wind up in court, where more than 40 percent of the defendants cannot provide the name and number of a friend or relative, according to the New York City Criminal Justice Agency. The agency interviews almost all defendants before they are formally charged at an arraignment and provides release recommendations to the presiding judges.

Aubrey Fox, the executive director of the agency, said people who cannot provide an emergency contact, which helps prove ties to the community, are less likely to be recommended for release without bail, and they are ineligible for alternatives like supervised release.

“So there is this debate about, how do you get defendants access to phone numbers in the cellphone era, when nobody remembers phone numbers anymore?” Mr. Fox said.

To address this problem, a 24-hour hotline started in the Bronx last fall offers one easy-to-remember number, 1-833-3-GOODCALL (1-833-346-6322), for people who are arrested. It is similar to one operating in Chicago. The hotline workers can connect a caller with lawyers from the Bronx Defenders and the Legal Aid Society and can notify relatives. The free service also allows people to store contact information. Good Call is available citywide, but the public defenders it uses are available only in the Bronx.

Similarly, the City Council recently approved legislation requiring the police to allow those who are arrested to copy phone numbers from their cellphones before they are arraigned, but not if the devices have been seized as evidence.

While intended to ensure that defendants return to court, bail forces thousands of people to fight their cases from inside jails because they cannot pay. Forty-two percent of the 43,227 cases in which judges set bail last year involved defendants who could not afford bail and were jailed until their cases were resolved, according to the Criminal Justice Agency.

Pretrial inmates are significantly more likely to plead guilty or be convicted, and to face sentences harsher than they would if they were free, according to researchers, public defenders and criminal justice reform advocates. And regardless of outcomes, being arrested and detained for even a short period can have far-reaching consequences, such as loss of employment, housing, child custody or immigration status.

“All of this happens before you’ve had a chance to defend yourself in court,” said Bill Cromie, the director of emergent technology at Blue Ridge Labs, a Brooklyn nonprofit where the hotline was developed last summer. “Good Call addresses that challenge by really giving people access to their rights and connecting them to their loved ones in their community.”

New York City police officers arrested more than 268,000 adults in 2016, according to the State Division of Criminal Justice Services. Most were African-American and Latino men accused of misdemeanor crimes, like fare evasion, and nonviolent felony offenses, like selling marijuana. Many were too poor to afford lawyers and relied on public defenders, who often have only minutes to spend on their clients' cases before an arraignment.

“With such little time, the public defenders don't really have the ability to call that family, collect that information and present that to a judge to push for a fair outcome,” said Gabriel Leader-Rose, 27, a co-founder of the hotline.

People who are arrested in the city are entitled to three phone calls, but that is of little use to those who cannot remember a phone number, Aramis Guzman, the community director of Good Call, said.

“We're the first person that we want you to call in the event that you are arrested,” he said. “You don't want to be playing Russian roulette with that last phone call you get.”

Ray, 27, of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, who requested that his last name not be used because he feared losing his job, was arrested three times in 2011 on charges of robbery and attempted robbery, according to court records.

Twice the charges were dismissed. But by the time he was released, Ray said, he had spent more than a week on Rikers Island. The police declined to discuss the cases because they were sealed.

“I knew I didn't do anything, but I didn't know who to call,” he said. He called his mother, but “she didn't know what to do.”

“She knows I was innocent and she couldn't help me,” he said. “That's the crazy part right there.”

In the third case, Ray pleaded guilty to robbery and received a suspended sentence. He said that case stemmed from bad decisions he made because he was struggling for money after losing the job he had before the arrests.

“That was the start,” he said. “It was hard to move forward.”

But he has. After years of working odd jobs, like collecting signatures for local political campaigns, he recently landed a full-time job for an online grocer. He also volunteers for Good Call.

On a recent evening in the South Bronx, which has some of the highest arrest rates in the city, it was easy to see the challenge Ray faces in persuading people to sign up for the service. At the Hub, a bustling transportation center where 149th Street crosses Melrose, Willis and Third Avenues, few people passing by said they would sign up.

Gwen Miller, 57, a sales director for the Mary Kay cosmetics company, said that just hearing about the hotline would get people thinking about what they would do if they were arrested.

“People in general just don’t know what to do in that situation,” she said. “But you have to know your rights.”

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