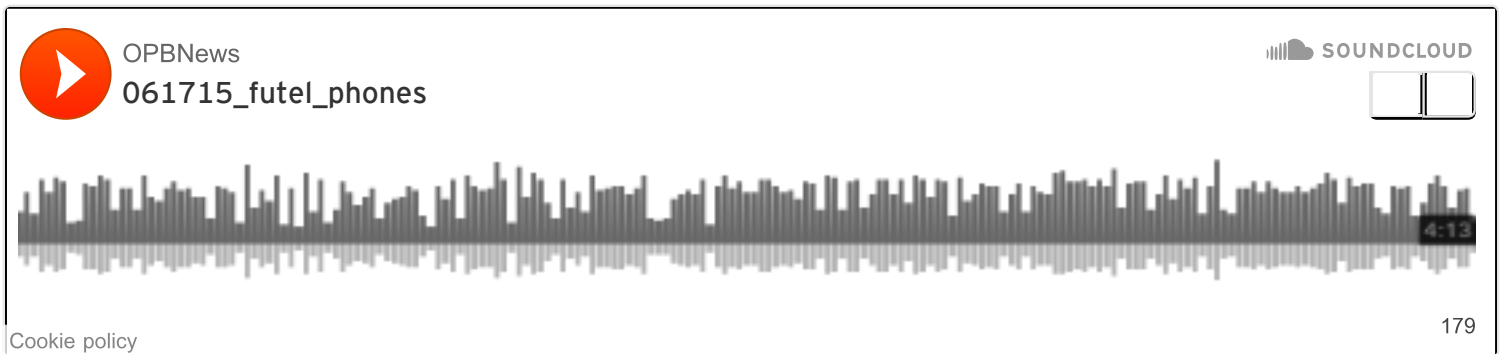


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Old Hardware, A New Twist: The No-Pay Phone

by **Kate Davidson** (/contributor/kate-davidson/) OPB | June 17, 2015 1:45 p.m. | Updated: June 18, 2015 4:10 p.m. | Portland



My cousin Jesse Wakeley was walking down Portland’s SE Clinton Street one day. As he approached SE 13th Ave., he noticed a phone booth. That struck him as odd, because you rarely see them these days.

“I noticed that it was labeled Futel,” he said. “And I’m thinking, ‘Well, that’s not a real phone company, what the heck’s going on?’”

He reached for the handset.



Futel's first phone: No coin needed for any calls.

There was no ringtone. Just a flat, recorded voice that said: “Welcome to Futel. To make a call, press one.”

Alternatively, the voice invited him to call the mayor, or leave an apology.

But the strangest thing about the phone may have been a little sign that read: “No Coin Needed For Any Calls.”

Karl Anderson and Elijah St. Clair are the two-man team behind Futel, which they call Portland's smallest phone company (<http://futel.net/>).

"The core of Futel is we are providing phone service," Anderson said. "We want anyone to be able to walk up and use the phone. We want to put that communication back on the streets where it used to be. It's a piece of standard, boring street hardware that we want to preserve: the phone."

So they took this phone booth and connected it to the Internet. They turned it into a Voice over IP, or VoIP phone.

"It's within the grasp of two geeks and a lot of their friends to create a phone company, and provide free phone service to any Joe that walks up on the street," Anderson said.

If you don't have someone to call, they'll give you someone. That's why you can call the mayor, or the apology line. They said basic motive is philanthropic, but they also wanted it to be fun.

Then, Anderson got practical. He asked if he could put a second Futel phone somewhere people could really use it — right in the middle of the homeless camp Right2DreamToo. This one doesn't have the wacky features, it's just for free calls.

Ibrahim Mubarak co-founded Right2DreamToo. Dozens of people shelter at the rest area every night. Some have cell phones, but some don't. Mubarak said people who are homeless still have folks they need to reach.

"Their parents, their family members, their caseworker, their probation, the police, the hospital, the emergency, the mental health ..." said Mubarak. The list goes on.



Elijah St. Clair (left) and Karl Anderson are the team behind Futel.

Kate Davidson/OPB



Jerry Chandler keeps an eye on the front entrance, and on Futel's second free phone, at Right2DreamToo.

Kate Davidson/OPB

Jerry Chandler was staying at the camp when I visited. He sometimes supervised the phone, which is just a handset, not a phone booth.

“One feller needed to call the bus station,” said Chandler. “He was offered a job and an apartment back home. He was from Oklahoma.”

Chandler said the man called and talked to the employer.

“He accepted the position,” he said. “And then he called to get the rate for the ticket to go home. And then he called the employer back. And they transferred the money, wired it, called Greyhound, whatever they did. And he got on his bus and he went home. That was really a great day for us.”

The camp limits the use of the phone, partly to keep out things like drugs and partly to keep the line free for emergencies.

“I used it one time to call 911 for an emergency that we had,” said Patricia Reed who lives at Right2DreamToo.

She said she was doing a security check of the camp one day, when she found a man having a seizure. She grabbed the phone.

“Ambulance came and got him stabilized and took him out of here,” she said. “I don’t personally, at that time didn’t personally, own a cell phone, so having that phone actually saved this gentleman’s life.”

It turns out access to a phone — a free phone — is nothing to take for granted.

KARL ANDERSON - FUTEL: THE TELEPHONE OF THE FUTURE, TO...



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