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Futel's 'pay phone' service; providing phone calls for free (Photos, video)



A pedestrian walks past a pay phone installed near the intersection of SE 13th Ave. and Clinton St. in SE Portland, March 14, 2015, which offers 100% free domestic phone calls. It's the work of Karl Anderson and Elijah St. Clair, both of Portland. Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Staff

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By [Kristyna Wentz-Graff | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)
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It looks like just another pay phone booth---the kind seen on nearly every street corner just a few decades ago.

But what's different about this pay phone, located near the intersection of SE 13th Ave. & SE Clinton St. in Portland, is that you don't need money to use it.

All domestic calls on this pay-free phone are 100% free.

The idea for a free public phone started when Portland resident Karl Anderson noticed those ubiquitous blue phone kiosks were all but gone. "I miss the street hardware," says Anderson.

According to a 2014 Federal Communications Commission report there are only 152,716

Futel's 'pay phone' provides free phone service

Futel uses an internet connection and salvaged pay phone parts to provide free domestic phone service, connection to services and human interaction.

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payphones remaining in the United States. By comparison, there were 2,086,540 in 1997.

Along with the disappearance of the pay phone, Anderson also observed two things directly related to the influx of cell phones: telephone communication had become limited for those who couldn't afford a mobile phone; and people's social behavior was radically changed when they did have one.

"You look around and see everyone looking at their little pocket computers," he says. "They have this posture of suffocation."

These observations left Anderson wondering---would it be possible to repurpose pay phones and make them relevant for today's society?

He brainstormed with his friend Elijah St. Clair, who had a pile of unused voice over internet protocol (VoIP) stuff in his garage.

"We got together and spent a whole bunch of time going nowhere," St. Clair jokes.

They began tinkering with what St. Clair describes as "very boring software used for an office phone systems". Eventually they struck upon an idea.

Using VoIP and salvaged pay phone hardware, they would provide people with free domestic phone service, voicemail, connection to services, and human interaction.

"We are at a time that it's within our grasp for two guys to run a phone company," laughs Anderson.

They named their venture "**Futel**" and installed the first phone in June 2014. It is hosted on private property but is publicly accessible.

At first some users found the call-for-free concept confusing.

"They don't quite follow it," says St. Clair. He and Anderson act as Futel's "operators", fielding calls from people who press "0" on the phone.

St. Clair continues, "I've had people call and say 'I keep putting quarters in and it keeps giving me quarters back'. I say, just press one and make your call and it's free."

Aside from getting assistance with the phone, people can also dial the operator for a little personal interaction. Both men willingly answer questions about the project, or just chat about whatever is on the caller's mind.

"I've had some really great conversations being the operator," says St. Clair.

"The operator is another service that we can provide to people," says Anderson. "Just a human to talk to if they want or need that. It's another experiment to see how people use it, really."

Providing a public service was a key foundational idea for the project. With a grant from **Awesome Portland**, a second Futel phone was installed at Portland's tent city "Right 2 Dream Too" in December 2014.

Despite some users' confusion, Futel phones are easy to use. A computerized voice recites a menu of pre-programmed options. Users can press a single button to be connected to the mayor's office, get a weather forecast line, or hear the TriMet Transit Tracker.

There is also a free voice mail system, thought it is currently only available when using a Futel phone. Anderson says, "the idea is that you'll be able to call in and check your voice mail. It doesn't have to be obvious that you can't afford a phone."

An unconventional phone should have a few unconventional features. Users can choose to talk with "Lance", whom Anderson says lives in rural Oregon and "has a different perspective on things". Or some might choose the "apologize" option and leave a message on a confessional apology line based in New York.

"We're trying to put together more interactive and artistic things with it. It would be nice if you could work on your duet with someone who isn't there," says Anderson.

Between both of the Futel phones, current operation expenses are about \$50 per month. Some of that cost is defrayed by donated services from cloud hosting service **Digital Ocean**.

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"Ongoing costs are a big thing," says Anderson. "We have to make sure it's sustainable for us to do. That's the whole point. It's something we can run for cheap."

Anderson and St. Clair are currently exploring options to expand the Futel system. To grow the program they will need to secure additional funding, for both hardware and operational expenses. "We want people to learn about it and use the phone, and hopefully be interested in hosting it," says Anderson. "It's helpful for people that need to use a darn phone, you know."

Right now people are talking about 250 minutes a week on the free phones.

"That includes me calling me my mother every weekend," says Anderson.


Then he adds with a smile, "That's one of the benefits of being a telephone mogul."

To hear more about Futel, check out [Karl Anderson's upcoming presentation at Hand-Eye Supply's Curiosity Club on April 7, 2015 at 6 p.m.](#)

--[Kristyna Wentz-Graff](#)



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Sounds phone-y in a good way! Sounds almost Sixties too in it's ethos. We need publicly available phones out there. Good on the Futel guys!

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