

INVESTIGATIONS

Money, threats and power: A lawmaker-led jail monitoring company's rise in Georgia

While Talitrix touts its high tech products as a way to help curb deaths in Georgia's county jails, the company's hard-nosed business tactics have faced criticism.



Credit: Miguel Martinez



By Dylan Jackson

March 22, 2024



In November, weeks after a \$2.1 million partnership between Fulton County and local software company Talitrix collapsed during an acrimonious public meeting, [state Rep. Lauren McDonald](#) received a troubling legal demand letter.

The letter, written by a Talitrix attorney, accused McDonald, a Republican from Cumming, of disparaging the company to a Fulton commissioner and warned that Talitrix would sue him if he did not immediately cease.

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McDonald knew the CEO Justin Hawkins because they both run in Republican circles in Forysth County. He said he was angered that the company's legal demand was served to his 15-year-old daughter when she was home alone. The letter prompted the state lawmaker to upgrade his home security system last fall.

"That's where I got pissed," McDonald said. "You can't get near my home without being looked at. I don't trust the CEO."



Credit: Natrice Miller/AJC

Rep. Lauren McDonald, R-Cumming, shown in House chambers at the Georgia State Capitol on Thursday, Feb. 8, 2024. (Natrice Miller / Natrice.miller@ajc.com)

Talitrix markets itself as a company on the cutting edge of criminal justice technology and pitches its marquee product — a biometric wristband worn by inmates, parolees and people free on bond — as a high-tech alternative to bulky ankle monitors and a solution to help curb inmate deaths plaguing Georgia’s county jails.

In presentations to public officials, Hawkins has compared his Alpharetta-based company’s rise to that of Uber’s insurgency into the taxi cab industry.

Yet Talitrix’s business strategy appears to be more old-fashioned. The company, whose investors and executives have included at least six former or current Republican lawmakers, said it has expanded its monitoring services to 48 counties in Georgia. Fueling its rise is a targeted strategy that has steered more than \$250,000 in campaign contributions and political expenditures to support several metro Atlanta officials, an AJC analysis of hundreds of pages of campaign finance records has found.



“Talitrix’s mission is to transform the criminal justice industry through innovative technologies that prioritize both community safety and participant remediation,” according to a statement the company issued to the AJC for this story.

The company has sought to leverage its relationships, mostly through a network of Georgia sheriffs who hold power to steer government contracts to Talitrix.

“It’s institutionalized bribery,” said William Perry, head of Georgia Ethics Watchdogs. “Unfortunately, that’s perfectly legal under Georgia law.”

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Meanwhile, those who have questioned or criticized Talitrix and its tactics have faced intimidating legal threats, four public officials said. Around the time McDonald was served, Forsyth County Commissioner Cindy Mills said she received her own Talitrix cease and desist letter.

“To me, it was a form of bullying,” Mills said.

Business strategy aside, public officials as well as law enforcement and privacy experts have expressed concern about Talitrix’s product and efficacy as a solution to the tragic deaths which have become all too commonplace in understaffed and overfull county jails. The company’s first large-scale rollout of its biometric jail technology in Fulton County — where two dozen inmates died in custody in 2022 and 2023 — was mired by delays and



when that name pops up it's a red flag," said Fulton County Commissioner Robb Pitts, who led a successful effort to rescind funding for the contract.

The controversy hasn't deterred the company, which has continued to secure new contracts throughout the Southeast. In the last few months, the company has announced several new partnerships, including in Pierce County and Haralson County in Georgia as well as with the Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office in Louisiana.

In a statement to the AJC, Talitrix said any legal letters sent were done with the advice of their attorneys. It acknowledged that while "active in the political arena" all of the company's contributions were made in full compliance with the law.

"Talitrix does not and would never engage in pay to play," the statement read.

Questions

Talitrix, founded in 2020, is registered in Alpharetta, but the company has deep ties to Forsyth County and its political scene. Hawkins, its CEO, is a Forsyth resident and the former chair of the county's Republican Party. Its investors include Forsyth Republicans [Rep. Todd Jones](#), [Sen. Greg Dolezal](#) and [Rep. Carter Barrett](#).

The company has developed a GPS-locating wristband the company [calls the "T-Band."](#) The wristbands, which resemble a smartwatch and send alerts if tampered with or removed, have been marketed as alternatives to ankle monitors, which for decades have been used to keep tabs on the whereabouts of parolees, sex offenders and people free on bond.

Talitrix touts its device's capability to track heart rate and other vitals. It employs a proprietary algorithm referred to as a "Talitrix Score" : a measurement the company says can track compliance and monitor behaviors of those wearing the bands. The company has also marketed its technology as a solution to help local sheriff's manage jail populations.

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Talitrix and its investors have supported several local politicians in Georgia who wield

\$250,000 in support of sheriff and a county commissioner in metro Atlanta.



Credit: Katelyn Myrick/AJC

Fulton County Sheriff Patrick "Pat" Labat requested \$2.1 million from county commissioners last spring to deploy the Talitrix wristbands in the Fulton jail. The funding for the contract was later rescinded after county commissioners became concerned about the contract. (Katelyn Myrick/katelyn.myrick@ajc.com)

One of the biggest beneficiaries of Talitrix-related campaign contributions is Fulton County Sheriff Pat Labat. Campaign finance records reviewed by the AJC show Labat, a Democrat, received nearly \$30,000 from Talitrix and related individuals. The donations began after he was elected sheriff in 2020, records show.

Donors include Rep. Jones, his company TJ Ventures as well as his wife Tracey and his adult son Colton, who works for Talitrix. The company itself also gave campaign donations to Labat, as did its CEO Hawkins, along with Charles Shaw, whose company, A&A All County Monitoring, was [acquired by Talitrix](#) in March 2023. Shaw said he is no longer involved with Talitrix and his donations to Labat, a longtime friend, were not made in



Labat while in office became a pitch man for Talitrix before the county commission. He requested \$2.1 million from county commissioners last spring to deploy the company's wristbands in the Fulton jail. With the technology, guards could monitor alarming drops or spikes in an inmate's blood pressure allowing them to more quickly respond to health and safety emergencies, he said. The Fulton commission, trying to help stem a [rash of jail deaths](#), approved funding for 1,000 wristbands.

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It didn't take long for the plan to come apart. Deaths at the jail continued and commissioners demanded answers. Commissioners called Labat to a public meeting in October to ask why the contract had not helped stem the tide of deaths as promised. What they learned concerned them.

In a contentious meeting, Labat's office revealed [just 15 Talitrix wristbands](#) had been deployed in the jail — despite assurances from the sheriff that the system would be up and running by July. Commissioners would also learn Labat had contracted with the company to install a similar system in the county's jail in Union City in 2021. They would learn about the campaign contributions to Labat from those with ties to Talitrix.

“The more we learned about it, the more questions we raised about it,” said Chairman Pitts, a Democrat, who led the effort to [rescind the \\$2.1 million contract](#) in October.

Labat is not the only public official to benefit from Talitrix's giving.



Credit: Arvin Temkar/AJC

Cobb County Sheriff Craig Owens (center) listens to the Senate Public Safety Committee at the Capitol on March 13, 2024. Owens received \$22,600 in donations last year from Talitrix and others with ties to the company. (Arvin Temkar / arvin.temkar@ajc.com)

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In Cobb County, Sheriff Craig Owens received \$22,600 in donations last year from Talitrix and others with ties to the company. That total included \$18,600 in donations in September, the same month the county was prepping installation of a Talitrix system in the county jail, records show. Similar to Labat, the donations to Owens, a Democrat, came from a variety of sources: a few thousand dollars from Rep. Jones' son, another couple thousand from Talitrix.

Owens was offered the system as a 45-day free trial but Cobb sheriff spokesperson Randi Okray told the AJC the sheriff ultimately did not test the system. Okray declined to say why the system never went live and referred questions regarding political contributions to Owens' campaign office. Emails obtained by the AJC show the decision to cease operations happened after the company had already installed hardware and was seemingly ready to go online in November. That was just weeks after the controversy over



After Talitrix's plans to expand in Cobb fell through, Sheriff Owens' campaign in January refunded \$9,000 in Talitrix-related campaign donations, county records show.

Subject: Re: Inmates for Pilot

Col. Hilsman,

I apologize for the delayed response. I was informed that Sheriff Owens and our CEO had a conversation and **all efforts have been ceased at this time.**

Regards,

Jonathan

Jonathan Shaw

PMO Lead

E: [REDACTED]

C: [REDACTED]

www.talitrix.com



Credit: Cobb County

Cobb County Sheriff Craig Owens received more than \$18,600 in donations the month the county was kicking off installation of a Talitrix system in September 2023. However, emails obtained by the AJC show the decision to cease operations happened after the company had already installed hardware and was seemingly ready to go online in November. (Cobb County)

▼ More

Donations such as those from Talitrix and those with ties to the company are a relatively common practice for those seeking to influence public officials, but it's still concerning, said Aunna Dennis, executive director of the Georgia chapter of Common Cause, a government and ethics watchdog group.

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The **current limit** for county politicians is \$3,300 for primary and general elections. Donating through related entities and family members helps skirt around Georgia's limits on individual giving, Dennis said.

"It may not be illegal in Georgia, but it's inappropriate," Dennis said.

In its statement to the AJC, Talitrix said clients choose the company based on its merits, not political activity.

"Talitrix firmly rejects any unfounded allegations or insinuations of impropriety as to the company's business activities," the company said.



In last year's Clayton County sheriff's race, Talitrix took a different approach to spread its influence.

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As the company was securing its multimillion-dollar contract in Fulton County in April, interim Clayton County Sheriff Levon Allen was running in a tight race against Clarence Cox. The candidates were running to replace former Clayton sheriff Victor Hill, who had been [sentenced to federal prison](#) for illegally ordering jail detainees to be strapped into restraint chairs for hours. Allen is Hill's godson.

Over the final months of the race, a Georgia political action committee closely tied to Talitrix spent roughly \$200,000 supporting Allen's election bid, records show. Unlike direct donations, PACs do [not have limits](#) on political spending.

The PAC, [Americans for Protecting the Public](#), listed the company as its sole funder on a campaign contribution disclosure report filed last July. The PAC's chairperson listed on the filing is former Forsyth Republican state lawmaker William "Marc" Morris. His [LinkedIn page](#) on Thursday said he joined Talitrix in 2021 and serves as a vice president, but a company attorney said he no longer works for Talitrix.

Allen won the special election runoff last April by the slimmest of margins. He beat Cox by less than 1%, fewer than 300 votes. Cox said Allen's eleventh-hour cash infusion from the PAC played a big role in his loss.

"They bombarded the streets with signs and other advertisements," said Cox, who is making another run for Clayton sheriff.

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Credit: Miguel Martinez

Talitrix CEO Justin Hawkins stands before a Talitrix data dashboard. Tuesday, May 2, 2023. Miguel Martinez / miguel.martinezjimenez@ajc.com

Once Allen secured victory, Hawkins worked closely with the sheriff and his department to try to secure work at the Clayton County jail, emails obtained by the AJC in an open records request show.

In September, Hawkins, the Talitrix CEO, sent Allen a PowerPoint presentation and talking points just hours before Allen asked Clayton County commissioners for \$4.5 million to start a Talitrix program in the jail. Before the Clayton commissioners, Allen's pitch echoed the argument Labat made in Fulton just months earlier: Talitrix's technology would save lives.

"It's amazing," Allen told the commission, according to a recording from that meeting.



Key Highlights is Talitrix has two business units: Outside the Walls & Inside the Walls

Inside the walls is a state of the art new technology that has been rapidly growing all across the united states with over twenty facilities piloting or in a contractual basis. The first of its kind that can do three things:

Credit: Clayton County

In September 2023, Talitrix CEO Justin Hawkins sent Clayton County Sheriff Levon Allen a PowerPoint presentation and talking points just hours before Allen asked county commissioners for nearly \$5 million to start a Talitrix program in the jail. (Clayton County)

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Three months later, Hawkins emailed Allen again hours before he was to go before the commission. This time he would discuss a Talitrix subsidiary, A&A All County Monitoring. Allen was set to present a request to expand the county's existing contract with A&A.

In the message, Hawkins briefed Allen on how to respond if a commissioner asked about Talitrix's involvement.

"If asked, yes A&A is owned by Talitrix but this has nothing to do with inside the walls as it relates to Fulton. This is a completely different product that is tested and proven," Hawkins wrote.

A&A is the current vendor for pre trial offenders

Currently have over 3,250 users across 107 jurisdictions and 48 in the state of Georgia.

If asked, yes A&A is owned by talitrix but this has nothing to do with inside the walls as it relates to Fulton. This is a completely different product that is tested and proven.

Lastly - we are the only company that can have an ankle, wrist and mobile application on one web platform where the sheriffs office can see everyone on a flight tracker. ****

It's a step down diversion program. High risk on ankle, medium risk on bands low risk on phones if need be.

Justin Hawkins
Chief Executive Officer

Credit: Clayton County

Talitrix CEO Justin Hawkins emailed Clayton County Sheriff Levon Allen hours before he was to go before the county commission in December 2023 and briefed Allen on how to respond if a commissioner asked about Talitrix's involvement with A&A All County Monitoring. (Clayton County)

At the meeting, a Clayton commissioner asked whether A&A was connected to Talitrix.



“This is already an existing contract that we have, that’s already proven,” the sheriff said.

The Clayton commission ultimately denied both requests.

Late night

Despite the local setbacks in metro Atlanta, Talitrix has continued to expand.

This year, the company said it inked monitoring contracts with the Pierce County Sheriff’s Office in South Georgia and the Tallapoosa mental health court in west Georgia for its “outside the walls” system, which monitors people who are under supervision outside of jail. Talitrix also announced it secured a deal in Louisiana with the Calcasieu Parish Sheriff’s Office.

As Talitrix has grown throughout Georgia and the Southeast, the company has had at least six current or former Republican state lawmakers hold various positions as board members, investors or executives.

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Credit: Natrice Miller / Natrice.Miller@

Rep. Todd Jones (R-South Forsyth) smiles as House members congratulate him on the passage of HB 520 on day 27 of the legislative session on Thursday, March 2, 2023. (Natrice Miller/ Natrice.miller@ajc.com)

Rep. Jones is Talitrix's chairman, and records show he is listed on some of the company's patents. Micah Gravley, a former Douglasville Republican representative, is Talitrix's Vice President of Business Development, according to [his LinkedIn page](#).

Sen. Dolezal's [personal disclosure form](#) reveals he owns a more than 5% stake of the company, valued at greater than \$5,000. [Rep. Matt Dubnik, R-Gainesville](#), lists himself as an investor in Talitrix, [holding a stake](#) worth more than \$5,000. Rep. Carter Barrett, R-Cumming, said he owns a less than 1.5% stake and plans to exit the company.

"I'm not involved in operations, management or decision-making of the company. I've made efforts to divest the shares, and expect to do so shortly," Barrett told the AJC.

The company has leaned on some of these high-profile investors as it evangelizes its products at public meetings and private events where they rub shoulders with other politicians. Talitrix's social media page is filled with photos of Hawkins and Gravley posing



In 2021, Jones and Gravley, who had not yet retired from the legislature, pitched Talitrix's wristband to a committee of Tennessee lawmakers. In 2022, the company helped [sponsor a golf tournament](#) held by the Georgia Chapter of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives.

And in the wake of the company's public thrashing in Fulton, Talitrix served as a [title sponsor](#) of Georgia Association of Black County Officials President's Reception at LowCountry Steak in Midtown Atlanta last December.

Several local public officials were in attendance, including Fulton commissioners Natalie Hall and Marvin Arrington Jr. Hall had abstained from voting two months earlier to rescind the funding for Talitrix's contract with Fulton County. Arrington was the lone voice on the commission who voted against rescinding the funding for the contract.

Some public officials who questioned or criticized the company have faced a much harsher response from Talitrix.

McDonald, Mills and Forsyth Commissioner Todd Levent all confirmed to the AJC they received legal notices from the company's lawyer in the fall threatening to sue them for disparagement.

In November, Talitrix's attorney, Robert Ashe, filed an open records request with Forsyth County seeking the emails and communications of Levent and Mills as well as a copy of the county's code of ethics for public officials.

"It's just another angle to intimidate us," Levent said.



Credit: Jason Getz / Jason.Getz@ajc.com

Fulton County Commissioner Bob Ellis said after he raised concerns about Talitrix, which had a contract at the county jail, he received a late-night text from the company's CEO demanding he retract his public statements. (Jason Getz / Jason.Getz@ajc.com)

Fulton County Commissioner Bob Ellis, a Republican from Milton, received a late-night text from Hawkins days after he publicly questioned Fulton's Talitrix contract at a commission meeting in October. In the message, Hawkins threatened Ellis with a libel lawsuit.

"Bob - you have til 5pm tomorrow to retract all public statements against Talitrix," the text, reviewed by the AJC, read.

Ellis also came home to find flyers placed near his mailbox, featuring his photo and accusing him of working with the "Fulton establishment" against law enforcement and selling out his constituents.

Printed on the mailer, reviewed by the AJC, is Americans for Protecting the Public, the Talitrix-backed PAC.



sold his company to Tailorix last year.

About the Author



Dylan Jackson

Dylan Jackson joined The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's investigations team in 2022 and writes about abuses of power.

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