

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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After more than a decade of families pleading for relief from exorbitant phone rates for calls placed by incarcerated people, the Federal Communications Commission issued an order last week to lower the cost of prison phone calls.

The FCC voted 2 to 1 to immediately cap the rate that prison phone-service providers can charge at 25 cents per minute. A 15-minute long-distance call cannot exceed \$3.75. Providers are also banned from charging extra fees to connect a call or to use a calling card, and from charging deaf and hard-of-hearing customers extra for relay services.

The FCC has been examining the problem of [exorbitant rates charged to the families of people in prison since friends and family of incarcerated people](#), who generally pay significantly higher toll rates than those offered for the typical interstate, long distance call, filed a petition nearly ten years ago.

It's been a long, long time coming, said acting Chairman Mignon Clyburn at the FCC meeting. She said 2.7 million children have a parent in prison and studies show that active communications between incarcerated people and their families helps reduce the rate of recidivism.

Two companies Global Tel*Link Corp. and Securus Technologies, Inc., make up 80% of the prison phone market. Rates are set by contracts between these companies and state and local governments, who often receive commissions or kickbacks for each prison site. As a result, family members in some states can pay as much as \$20 for a 15-minute phone call.

Last year alone, prisons in 42 states received \$103.9 million in kickbacks from the phone firms, according to Prison Legal News. A review of these rates indicates that states that get kickbacks from phone providers have dramatically higher phone rates for incarcerated people and their families.

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122 Commerce Street Montgomery, AL 36104 [\(334\) 269-1803](tel:334-269-1803) [\[emailprotected\]](#)

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