

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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The Federal Communications Commission has proposed rules changes that would bring down the rates for interstate phone calls placed from prisons, which now cost families up to 15 times more than regular rates.

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. Tens of thousands of consumers have been pleading for relief on interstate long distance rates from correctional facilities, according to an FCC statement on December 28, 2012.

This is not just an issue of markets and rates; it is a broader issue of social justice, said Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel. When a single phone call may cost as much as a month of unlimited phone service, the financial burden of staying in touch may be too much for inmates families to bear.

The telephone is a crucial instrument for the incarcerated, and those who care about them, because voice calling is often the only communications option available, FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn said in a statement. Most inmates along with their families and friends are low-income, so in-person visits due to distance and expense are infrequent.

Maintaining contact with family and friends during incarceration not only helps the inmate, but it is beneficial to our society as a whole, Commissioner Clyburn explained, by reducing the likelihood that those released will reoffend.

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 \$15 for a 15-minute phone call.

The FCC is currently seeking public opinion over a 60-day period concerning its proposal.

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Los Angeles Times

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