

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/texas-dramatically-reduces-price-phone-calls-prison/>

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TDCJ

The Texas Board of Criminal Justice on Friday approved a more than 75 percent reduction in the cost of telephone calls for incarcerated people.

Effective on September 1, rates will drop from 26 cents per minute to 6 cents per minute, regardless of the destination of the call. Rather than about \$4, atypical 15-minute call will cost 90 cents under a new contract with CenturyLink.

The new OTS contract is going to benefit not only families of offenders who are hoping to stay connected, but enhance the agency's focus on re-entry, Texas Department of Criminal Justice Executive Director Bryan Collier told the [Texas Tribune](#). The system is used to maintain relationships with friends and family that are a vital part of a successful re-entry and reintegration of offenders into the community.

The board also increased the time limit on phone calls from 20 to 30 minutes. In a press release, corrections officials said that CenturyLink will provide video visitation services that will allow families to contact their loved ones from further away, but the new technology will not replace in-person visits.

[Under Texas law](#), 60 percent of phone revenue goes to the contractor and 40 percent goes to the state. Of that 40 percent, the first \$10 million goes to the Texas Crime Victims Compensation Fund; after that first \$10 million, half goes to the victims fund and half goes to the state's general fund. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice reported that the victim fund received nearly \$15 million from prison phone calls last year, and the phone system yielded \$4.49 million for general revenue.

Private [phone companies](#) have long charged exorbitant rates to families of incarcerated people for talking to their loved ones in prison. Family members in some states can pay as much as \$20 for a 15-minute phone call. Last year, the Federal Communications Commission [declined to defend](#) regulations that would have capped the cost of phone calls from people in jails and prisons at 11 cents per minute; the regulations were then struck down by a federal court.

The new contract approval in Texas [drew accolades](#) from lawmakers and activists, who recognize that while maintaining connections with family and friends reduces recidivism and facilitates re-entry, high phone rates mean that families of incarcerated people often cannot afford to stay in touch.

State Representative and chair of the House Committee on Corrections James White raised concerns with the corrections department about the cost of phone calls from prison. He was extremely, extremely proud of the decision to reduce rates, and [said](#) that prison officials are making some very, very significant changes that will impact recidivism, rehabilitation and ultimately will increase safe communities in Texas.

Doug Smith, a formerly incarcerated man who works with the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, [said](#) that the lower rates are critical to helping incarcerated people stay in touch with family and friends. I'm so happy for the families who struggle to afford these phone calls, he said. Now there's going to be parents who can afford to call home and maybe help with their kids' homework.

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