

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/families-will-be-negatively-affected-by-the-fccs-new-stance-on-phone-calls-behind-bars>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Can you hear me now?

That's the iconic catch phrase used during Verizon's promotion campaign from 2002 to 2011. A familiar call-back to youth, it is also becoming a commonly asked question behind the walls of prisons and jails throughout the country. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) [has recently begun to backtrack](#) on its position [to ensure affordable pricing for families](#) to call their incarcerated loved ones.

There are many [societal benefits](#) of incarcerated people remaining in contact with their family during incarceration, including improved facility safety, as well as improved outcomes for incarcerated parents and their children. However, many families struggle with the cost of staying in touch, and the price of phone calls in some states [are as high as \\$1 per minute](#). In 2015, the *New York Times* reported on how [one woman spent a combined sum of \\$3000](#) about \$60 a week on phone calls made to her husband during his time between jail and prison within the year after he was arrested. Although a non-prison call within Pennsylvania would only cost her 60 cents for an entire 15 minutes, her calls to her husband at the prison where he was held cost her \$12.95 for a similar 15-minute call. Other outlets, such as The Marshall Project, have highlighted [the difficult life decisions families have had to make](#) to remain in contact with their loved ones. For example, one grandmother decided to pay for a phone call instead of for medication she needed. These costs not only affect individual families while a person is incarcerated, but worsens that person's opportunities for reentry success, due to decreased financial resources within the family.

States have the opportunity to ease these constraints. For example, in 2007, New York Governor Eliot Spitzer [ordered an initial 50 percent reduction](#) in rates for receiving collect telephone calls from state prisons, including the per-call surcharge and per-minute use charge. This decision resulted in a 35 percent increase in call volume and a 36 percent increase in call minutes. The great success in family contact due to a reduction in cost led to a secondary reduction the same year. Overall, these actions resulted in a 57.5 percent reduction in call rates: from a \$3-per-call surcharge and a 16-cents-per-minute use charge before April 2007 to a \$1.28-per-call surcharge and a 6.8 cents-per-minute use charge at the end of 2008. [More examples include](#) New Mexico banning commissions in 2001, which showed a 93.8 percent drop in costs for interstate calls, and South Carolina banning commissions in 2008, demonstrating an 80.3 percent drop in costs for interstate calls.

The FCC should follow these examples and return to their previous stance, which promoted affordable and functional services in prisons and jails. In particular, the FCC should continue supporting families in staying connected to their loved ones who are incarcerated. As they had decided in their [2015 decision](#), the FCC should restore caps on all interstate and intrastate inmate calling rates, eliminate unnecessary fees by capping or banning burdening ancillary fees, and facilitate access for people with disabilities. This had been a step up from their [2013 initiative](#), which required all interstate inmate calling rates and ancillary fees be based on the cost of providing services to inmates, and provided immediate relief to exorbitant rates by establishing just, reasonable, and cost-based caps and rates.

Both states and the FCC have a responsibility to put the needs of families first and ensure access to telecommunications services. The economic, social, and individual benefits are compelling, and the need to relieve countless families from the staggering financial burden is pressing. Ensuring that families remain in contact improves reentry outcomes, which can improve communities at large. The cost of contact while a person is incarcerated is not a single-party issue, but the centerpiece for creating a safe and equitable society.

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