

A long time coming: The future of prison phone justice reform

Written by Dr. Artika R. Tyner
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The FCC voted 2-1 to reform interstate phone rates policies.

The recent FCC ruling is a milestone in the road to victory in the arena of prison phone justice reform. This is one step forward in ensuring that the costs of prison phone calls are fair and reasonable. Access to affordable prison phone calls will create opportunities for millions of family members to remain in contact with their incarcerated loved ones.

During the FCC hearing, Bethany Fraser, a mother and wife, shared her story about the challenges her family faces as she seeks to remain in regular contact with her incarcerated husband.

Fraser is the mother of two young boys, ages 5 and 10.

"Losing their father to prison also meant losing over half of our family's income, and gaining a painfully large phone bill," said Fraser. "As you vote today I would like each of you to know that I would do anything, and pay any amount to keep my children connected to their father. But choosing between essential needs and keeping kids connected to their parents is a choice no family should have to make."

Fraser spoke truth to power as she shared the story of millions of children across the United States who are invisible victims of the injustice of egregiously high phone rates. Nationally, there are 2.7 million children who have an incarcerated parent. There are more than 15,000 children in Minnesota who share this experience. For each of these children, the high costs of prison phone calls limit their ability to communicate with their parent who is incarcerated.

Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel shed light on the social costs of this issue when she stated, "one number still haunts me, perhaps because I am a parent. Across the country there are 2.7 million children who have at least one incarcerated parent. That is 2.7 million children who don't know what it means to talk regularly to their mother or father."

This is especially problematic when for far too many families a phone call is the only viable means of communication. This is a harsh reality since most prisoners are incarcerated on the average of 100 miles from home.

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Acting FCC Chairwoman Mignon Clyburn reiterated the imminent need for policy reform since interstate phone calls should be cost-based. Both Rosenworcel and Clyburn acknowledged the analysis of this dilemma should move beyond examining the market forces to understanding the social justice challenges experienced by families and communities. While on one hand, the market forces with unfettered discretion had allowed for the cost of a 15-minute phone call to be upwards of \$20. However, on the other hand, the social justice analysis acknowledges the difficult decision many families are forced to make as they must choose between remaining in contact with their incarcerated loved ones and meeting their basic household needs.

In her concluding remarks, Clyburn thanked Martha Wright, a grandmother who is the namesake of the "Wright Petition" (who began the journey toward prison phone justice reform). According to the chairwoman, Wright saw a great wrong and sought to make it right.

The recent victory serves as a key milestone on the road to prison phone justice reform. This ruling will cap the costs of interstate (long distance) calls.

A change has come. However, there is still more work to be done. The next step is to begin local advocacy, which will focus on addressing the high costs of intrastate (local) calls in the state of Minnesota. Locally, a 15-minute collect prison phone costs about \$17.

For more information on how to become involved in the advocacy efforts of the Campaign for Prison Phone Justice, visit www.nationinside.org/campaign/prison-phone-justice/. The Campaign for Prison Phone Justice is challenging prison phone kickbacks and the U.S. Prison Telephone Industry.

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