

## Minnesota needs prison phone policy reform

Written by Alex Migambi

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When we think about freedom today, some see it as a historical ideal that has been achieved and while others are so overwhelmed with the injustices around them that they have given up hope of ever affecting any form of change.

As we celebrate the life of Nelson Mandela, we cannot forget he was impacted by the loss of freedom that comes with being incarcerated. In his book, "Long Walk to Freedom," Mandela recalled that while in prison, he was entitled to have only one visitor and write and receive one letter every six months. He said that it was "one of the most inhumane restrictions of the prison system."

Many people today face barriers to remain in contact with their incarcerated loved ones hence prison phone justice is a contemporary freedom issue. The high cost of prison phone calls has continued to affect those families that have suffered the wrath of mass incarceration. As Mandela stated, "communication with one's family is a human right, it should not be restricted by the artificial gradations of the prison system." Mass incarceration has far-reaching consequences on Minnesota families and communities of color that have had to foot expensive prison phone bills to keep in touch with their loved ones.

According to a report from The Sentencing Project, African-Americans have the highest rate of incarceration in Minnesota. If we break down the statistics from the report, African-Americans are almost nine times more likely to be arrested than their white counter parts in Minnesota. The latest statistics as of July 2013 from the Minnesota Department of Correction show that African Americans make up about 35 percent of the total prison population although they only make up 5.5 percent of the population in Minnesota. Families with an incarcerated loved one pay up to \$17 for a 15-minute collect call. Since many of their loved ones are incarcerated at an average of 100 miles from their homes, a phone call is the most feasible means to keep in contact.

Let's put this into context. Being an international student who calls Uganda several times a month, I would not be able afford to speak with my parents if the rate was similar to that of prison phone calls. It actually costs me about \$5 for a 60-minute phone call.

You are then left to wonder, why are prison phone calls so expensive? The typical scenario is that prison phone service providers promise to pay high commissions to the state in order to

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secure contracts. The cost of this high commission is then passed on to the most vulnerable families who are already financially struggling when a relative is incarcerated. In Minnesota, Global Tel Link is the prison phone service provider for the state prisons and it pays 49 percent in commissions to the state. This generates about \$1.44 million in annual revenues. The cost of a prison phone call therefore is inflated to cover the cost of these commissions.

African-American families and communities with incarcerated loved ones have felt the financial and social costs due to the high costs of prison phone calls. According to the U. S. Census Bureau, more than 44 percent of African-American households in Minnesota live below the poverty line. Further, the median household income of many African-Americans is less than half of the median income of their white counterparts. If we look at the cost of a prison phone call in terms of hourly wage, a \$17 prison phone call is more than the average hourly wage (\$13.07) earned by many African-Americans, according to a report from the Minnesota Budget Project. This means that families in our community are forced to make a difficult choice of foregoing basic needs such as food and shelter to keep in contact with their incarcerated loved ones.

The Campaign for Prison Phone Justice seeks to further the cause of freedom today because it seeks to address the threat to strong families and safer communities. In the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter."

Let us therefore not be silent to freedom being diminished by the high cost of prison phone calls.

Please visit [www.prisonphonejustice.org](http://www.prisonphonejustice.org) and sign up to help fight for prison phone justice in Minnesota.

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