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FCC considers limiting costs of long-distance calls for families of prisoners in Ohio



(<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/sdonalds/index.html>) By Stan Donaldson, The Plain Dealer
(<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/sdonalds/posts.html>)

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Print (http://impact.cleveland.com/metro/print.html?entry=/2013/02/fcc_considers_placing_cap_on_c.html)

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The price of long-distance calls for the families of inmates inside Ohio prisons could be coming down this year.

The Federal Communications Commission

(<http://www.fcc.gov/>) has been looking into the calls' cost in part to make it easier for prisoners and their families to keep in contact and continue to forge family bonds -- bonds experts say are needed to help inmates re-enter society when they are released.

Though the FCC does not have jurisdiction to cap the costs of calls in Ohio's 28 prisons made to Ohio numbers, its potential ruling regulating interstate calls could influence how those communications are handled.



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Inmates walk on the grounds of the Noble Correctional Institution in Caldwell, Ohio.

Marvin Fong, Plain Dealer file

Photo of t



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Strongsville teachers gather before court

• Photos from The Plain Dealer (<http://photos.cleveland.com/index.html>)

FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn told The Plain Dealer last week that some families pay as much as \$17 for a 15-minute state-to-state phone call to a Ohio prison. Clyburn said the high cost lessens the contact families could have with loved ones who are in prison.

The agency's interest is part of an effort that began 13 years ago by several groups who have petitioned to cut costs of interstate phone communications, which Clyburn said have been characterized as "neither just, nor reasonable."

The agency is accepting comments about the costs of prison phone calls until March 25 at its website. A response period will follow, and then the FCC staff will formulate recommendations to present to the FCC chairman. He will present them to the board.

Clyburn said phone prices have an impact on families -- low-income families in particular.

She said in many instances, families only communicate with incarcerated relatives over the phone because they can't travel to prisons which in some cases are hundreds of miles away.

Clyburn and several local experts say that studies show prisoners who have consistent contact with their families are less likely to return to prison after they are released. They also say it helps strengthen parent and child bonds that have been broken because of a prison sentence.

The FCC took notice of the issue in 2003 after a petitioner asked the agency to prohibit prisons from engaging in exclusive contracts with phone companies so competition could be encouraged and costs reduced. The case was led by Martha Wright, whose grandson was incarcerated. Wright filed a lawsuit against the Corrections Corporation of America and several phone companies in 2000 because of high rates she paid for long-distance calls. The case was referred to the FCC.

Last year, Clyburn said she met with several grass-roots organizations, churches and groups that work with prisoners and had concerns about long-distance phone costs.

Though the FCC cannot cap the costs of interstate calls, an FCC ruling could impact how calls within a state are handled.

Clyburn said several states like Nebraska and cities like New Orleans have reduced phone costs for prisoners.

In Ohio, phone prices at county and municipal jails are handled by the facilities and the phone companies. The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio has set the maximum amount phone companies can charge at 36 cents a minute and a setup fee -- the cost to initiate a call within the state -- can't be higher than \$2.75.

The long-distance fees at Federal Bureau of Prisons facilities is 23 cents a minute, and 6

cents for direct calls. A long-distance collect call is 40 cents a minute, plus a \$2.45 connection fee, said Chris Burke, a spokesman.

The fees at state prisons vary. Kathi Tarkir, a complaint analyst for Global Tel Link Corp. in Alabama, said in a email the company handles all telecommunications services for Ohio's prisoners, which counted 49,626 as of last week. The company also handles phone calls for the Cuyahoga County Jail.

Tarkir said the corporation, which works with 1,700 prisons and jails in the United States, is aware of the FCC's inquiry and declined to disclose prices for calls at Ohio correctional facilities.

The company pays the state \$15 million a year to handle prison communications. State officials said the money goes to fund education, recovery services and inmate payroll.

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections sent a copy of a price list to The Plain Dealer with various prices that depended on the time of day and distance from where the call is made. The prices for a regular collect call would be assumed by the person who accepts the collect call from the prisoner and would be billed to their service provider.

For instance, an interstate collect call to a prison has a \$3.90 setup charge and is priced at 32 cents a minute. A call within the state has setup fees between \$1.04 to \$1.14, and the initial minute -- the first minute of a call -- ranges from 10 to 23 cents depending on the time of day. Additional per-minute prices range from 14 cents a minute to less than a penny a minute. The length of the phone call depends on the prison.

Global Tel Link prices for a prepaid interstate call include a \$3.12 surcharge and is less than 1 cent per minute. Other prices vary depending on the time of day and distance from where the person called.

On its website, the ORDC states phone rates (http://www.drc.ohio.gov/web/phone_services.htm) are higher than average long-distance rates because of additional equipment that is installed to control and monitor calls for inmates.

The department also states that prepaid cards and offender phone debit calling offer a 20 percent discount.

In Cleveland, some groups and politicians who work with the current prisoners, ex-offenders and their families say cheaper phone rates for long-distance and intrastate calls would be welcome.

"A lot of families are disgruntled because of the charges they receive from long-distance calls," said Cindy Lightner, founder of When In Need Consulting Solutions, a program that provides support services for ex-offenders in Cleveland.

Lightner said in recent months, she has worked with families or people who have

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purchased cell phones with area codes associated in the same zip code of the prison where their relative or significant other is imprisoned.

Omar Stearns, 41, of Cleveland, changed his cell phone number in the fall so he wouldn't be charged additional fees to talk with the mother of his three children who is incarcerated at a county jail in Elizabethtown, Ky.

Stearns said prior to him getting a cellphone with a Kentucky zip code, he had to save up enough money every week in order to speak with her.

"It was 15 dollars for 15 minutes," Stern said. "After a while, that adds up."

State Sen. Shirley Smith said she would also like to see cheaper costs for calls made within the state. She said it is vital for families and inmates to maintain communication because it helps the inmate rehabilitate.

"For the life of me, I don't understand how they calculate these costs and put them on the backs of inmates and their families," Smith said. "The costs are too high, they really are."

Some local groups in Cleveland once offered programs to help the families of inmates communicate with them.

For seven years, the Cleveland East Side Ex-Offender Coalition operated a free video visitation program for families at three Ohio prisons for one hour a week. The program ended in 2011 in part because a state grant was not renewed. Global Tel Link offers a pay video visitation service in at least four Ohio prisons.

Caroljean Gates, director of the coalition, said private companies have created a monopoly on the state-level and more monitoring by politicians and the public is needed.

"Ohio needs to do whatever it takes to keep families in touch with each other while an inmate is incarcerated."

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Sheryl Harris, The Plain Dealer (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/sbharris/index.html>)

The federal regulations will not affect calls made from within Ohio to Ohio prisons. But Ohio's Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation chooses the phone company that pays the state the most money -- right now GTL pays Ohio \$15 million to handle communications for Ohio prisoners. It has to recoup that money in fees to families. In states that ban these types of commissions, phone calls are as low as 5 cents. http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2013/02/fcc_considers_placing_cap_on_c.html

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towwwdothello (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/towwwdothello/index.html>)

Some crooks are better connected than others.

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BlackSquirrel (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/BlackSquirrels/index.html>)

Some people think these rates and charges on prison-origination calls are too much, but remember they are revenue generating for the prison. Money that otherwise would be coming out of your taxes.

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amazing the right criminals have! as if 3 hots and a cot, tv, free healthacare etc. wasn't enough!

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thinkthntalk (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/thinkthntalk/index.html>)

You are so right, onefifth, prison is a cushy setup.

 (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/gregkarma/index.html>)Publius and

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Basement Dweller (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/rk9/index.html>)

It won't be long before we see this line on our phone bills.

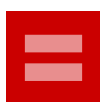
Free Phone Calls For Prisoners Subsidy.....\$5.00

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Publius (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/gregkarma/index.html>)

(<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/gregkarma/index.html>) There's no need for a subsidy because this scam generates pure profit. End the scam--end the profit--no subsidy needed.

And, no one said free, just not a rip-off.

Right now, the taxpayers are paying for this, because

/gre prisoners cut off from their families are more likely to
gkar commit more crimes.

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Basement Dweller
(<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/rk9/index.html>)

But by that logic, if they were free, the prisoners could talk more and there would be even less repeat crime

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Publius (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/gregkarma/index.html>)

Show me research to that effect. The research does show that the status quo increases crime.

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IamBAD5 (<http://connect.cleveland.com/user/IamBAD5/index.html>)

(<http://connect.cleveland.com/>)

Gee....I haven't seen a "long-distant" charge on my phone bill in.....I don't remember when.....I think that this is a racket set up by phone companies and the prisons to make money on the backs of the poorest of the poor....

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