

Local: DC

# FCC urged to reduce phone costs for prison inmates

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6 Comments



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A congressional coalition urged the Federal Communications Commission on Wednesday to heed a D.C. woman's request to reduce the cost of telephone calls by inmates throughout the United States.



"The burden is excessively put on those who can least afford it," said Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District's nonvoting House member.

Norton and the Congressional Black Caucus are pressing the FCC to back a proposal from Martha Wright, a D.C. woman whose grandson served time for manslaughter, to set a maximum charge of 7 cents per minute for prison phone calls.

In most jurisdictions, that would represent a significant discount from existing rates that regulators say can include per-call charges of \$3.95. Many states also add fees as high as 89 cents per minute to the tab. In Georgia, one of the most expensive states for inmates, a 15-minute long-distance call costs \$17.30.

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Inmates in Maryland can pay more than \$7 for a 15-minute interstate call. Virginia officials could not be reached Wednesday.

Celestine Johnson, a Ward 1 resident whose son is serving an eight-year sentence in Kentucky, said phone calls have become a luxury.

"It's just ridiculous," said Johnson, who has not spoken to her son since February. "America is built on the freedom of speech. Just because you're incarcerated, that right should not be abolished."

The FCC has received hundreds of comments since it announced in December that it would study new regulations, and telecom providers and sheriffs have mounted intense opposition to rate caps.

Telmate, a prison phone service, said that the proposed limit "would have an extremely deleterious impact on the security of facilities, inmates, their friends and family members and the marketplace as a whole."

Many jailers say they rely on revenues from phone calls to bankroll critical security measures, although eight states do not receive any commissions from phone calls at all.

"There is no question that the capping of inmate phone call rates by the FCC will have serious impacts on the safety and security of correctional facilities," the Oregon State Sheriffs' Association told the FCC.

Lawmakers disputed that claim, and Rep. Bobby Rush, D-Ill., accused prison officials of maintaining "a slush fund for special activities and equipment."

The FCC's review stems from a 2001 federal court ruling that the agency needed to set a fair rate for phone calls, but the commission did not take action for years.

That delay has been the subject of discomfort inside the FCC.

"Martha Wright came to the commission nine years ago," Commissioner Ajit Pai wrote in December. "When she did so, she could not have expected to wait longer for action on her petition than it took the prison system to release her grandson. Ms. Wright expected -- and deserved -- better."

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