

I am submitting this comment to share my observations on the urgent need to reform the current system, which constitutes an obstacle to justice.

My knowledge of the current system is based on my experience as a volunteer with a telephone hotline operating within a county jail in California. This hotline facilitates a limited number of free calls to asylum seekers and migrants in detention who are awaiting their immigration court proceedings. As a hotline volunteer, I connect detained callers to an outside line that allows them to speak, for eight minutes per call, to family members, friends and lawyers on the outside.

Without this hotline service, these detained asylum seekers and migrants would be isolated. The current system of exorbitantly high cost of phone calls and the complex enrollment that requires a credit card, and a pre-paid deposit to a single phone number is an effective barrier to their connection to the outside world.

In the case of migrants and asylum seekers, this is particularly cruel and unjust. Since these people are not automatically entitled to legal defense and often do not have legal support (pro bono or otherwise), it is usually up to their families (here in the US and abroad) to do the legwork required to support their claims and secure their release. Even when detained individuals do have legal representation, the high cost of phone calls interferes with their access to lawyers or others who can provide the documentation they need to present their cases.

In the era of Skype and inexpensive phone plans available worldwide, the current system is a venal and corrupt mechanism to extract extra profits from an especially vulnerable and needy population who is seeking asylum and residency in the US, and must be reformed.

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