

Dear Commissioners,

I am deeply concerned about how sheriffs' departments across the country are receiving hundreds of millions of dollars from commissions on county jail telecommunications services. These departments prey on the most vulnerable members of our society and make it more difficult for inmates to maintain contact with their loved ones on the outside, not to mention, in many cases, people like me, their defense counsel. I urge you to cancel these commission deals as part of your ongoing review of the industry.

Almost one year ago, the FCC held a workshop on inmate telephone rates and during that time, these fees being negotiated by sheriffs have only increased. During the 11 years that commissions have been in place, they have increased from 10 percent to an average of 60 percent, and some as high as 98 percent. Study after study demonstrates that the easier time inmates have remaining connected with the outside world, the greater chance they have of successfully reintegrating into society once they are released. It is in our best interest as a society to do whatever we can to eliminate the cycle of incarceration and to reduce recidivism.

Instead of contributing to this important goal, sheriff departments across the country continue to demand exorbitant commissions to provide telecommunications services to inmates. They even went so far as to threaten to eliminate this vital service if their commissions are cut. This outrageous claim only serves to underscore the need to act.

Eliminating commissions, working in tandem with a cap on per-minute calling rates, will significantly lower costs for inmates and their families and provide a more affordable lifeline during such a trying time.

The FCC has a clear mandate to act, and should move to eliminate commissions as soon as possible.

As criminal defense counsel as well as counsel for civil rights plaintiffs, my clients are often indigent. They are often incarcerated in jails hundreds of miles from me (Wyoming is a big state). I have the absolute right to visit them in person, but most sheriffs will not allow me to contact their prisoners by phone, unless I sign up for the inmate telephone plan that is just about as expensive as using a satellite phone in the middle of Africa. I operate my law practice on a shoestring, and usually am not in a position to front those costs.

Sincerely,

Hon. Philip E. Abromats  
Attorney at Law  
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