

October 14, 2015

Hon. Tom Wheeler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

RE: Inmate Calling Services WC Docket No. 12-375

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

The undersigned 20 national civil rights and social justice organizations (“the Civil Rights Coalition”), representing thousands of constituents, urge the Commission to institute comprehensive reforms to inmate calling services (ICS) that will create more affordable rates for the incarcerated and their families.

We believe that the predatory practices in the prison payphone marketplace are unacceptable and further disadvantage populations desiring a reasonable gateway to ongoing communications between incarcerated persons and their loved ones.

The Civil Rights Coalition supports the Commission’s plans to proceed with cap rates for all ICS calls, including local, long-distance and international, and the imposition of limits on excessive fees on calls. Over the last 15 years, inmates and their families have experienced a virtual tax on their pain by paying phone rates that far exceed those paid by average Americans, while this cruelty has enabled the prison payphone industry to skyrocket to \$1.2 billion in assets.

Consequently, the Civil Rights Coalition urges the Commission to proceed with comprehensive reform to the regulation of ICS that fully addresses *all* of the predatory traps associated with its current structure. In addition to providing more certainty through rate caps, we strongly recommend that the Commission also curtail the uncertain, and often excessive, site commission fees that contribute to the same exorbitant price structure for prison phone calls.

While some correctional facilities and sheriffs claim that site commissions are required to support the administration of prisons and jails, inmate advocacy groups have concluded that these fees are not only regressive, but also passed onto vulnerable consumers already struggling to pay for the cost of a phone call. The Civil Rights Coalition believes that the Commission has clear jurisdiction to proscribe some consistency in their application.

Meaningful reform is long overdue, and against the backdrop of mass incarceration of people of color, the Commission’s timing on this issue is critical. In 2014, more than 2 million people were incarcerated on any given day in the U.S. According to data from the *Sentencing Project Research and Advocacy for Reform*, approximately 60 percent of the people in prison are currently people of color. FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn has noted that more than 2.7 million children, who have committed no crime, are also the victims of an unreasonable inmate calling structure because they can’t stay in contact with their parents.

As we embark on ICS reform, the Civil Rights Coalition encourages the agency to consult and coordinate with all relevant stakeholders. Commissioner Clyburn has suggested that this effort can result in fundamental fairness in the prison phone system, and we agree. We urge the Commission to implement comprehensive changes that ensure that consumers, whose only choice for communications is through the ICS system, will not be further harmed.

Sincerely,

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC

Blacks in Government (BIG)

Faith in Works

MANA, A National Latina Organization

Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC)

NAACP

National Action Network

National Association of Neighborhoods

National Association of Multicultural Digital Entrepreneurs (NAMDE)

National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP)

National Coalition on Black Civic Participation and Black Women's Roundtable

National Consumers League

National Urban League

OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates

Politic365

Public Knowledge

Southern Christian Leadership

Rainbow PUSH Coalition

U.S. Black Chambers, Inc.

Jason Llorenz, JD, Rutgers University School of Communication & Information

cc: Hon. Mignon Clyburn
Hon. Ajit Pai
Hon. Jessica Rosenworcel
Hon. Michael O'Rielly

The contact person for this letter is Kim Keenan, Esq., President and CEO, Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC), kkeenan@mmtconline.org.