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Jail Profits, Prisoners and Their Families Pay

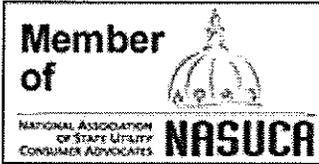
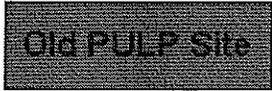
Peter Santacroce understands his friend, whom we'll call Michael, may need to call and talk every now and then, and he's more than willing to lend a sympathetic ear, to listen, to be supportive. But that is becoming an increasingly difficult and expensive proposition.



Michael is currently serving time in a county jail on probation violation charges. And like thousands of inmates throughout New York State, he can only telephone friends and relatives from jail by making collect calls on lines provided to the jail by telecommunication giants like Verizon and AT&T -- which many say have negotiated sweetheart deals with the counties and the state to provide outgoing phone services to inmates.

"I try to be a support system to the kid, anything to help the guy cope with what he's going through," Santacroce said, adding that he didn't mind accepting collect charges. "I'll take the charges. What's a couple of bucks?"

But Santacroce, as well as Michael's parents, soon began to see that charges on their phone bills were more than mere chump change, and that "a couple of bucks" translated to exorbitant charges. Last month, Michael's mother received a bill charging \$22.40 for a 10-minute call, and \$19.47 for a seven-minute call.



Although officials say AT&T handles long distance calls from the jails, the bill shows that the calls had been re-routed to a company in Las Vegas.

Mike’s father said that calls home from the jail have routinely started at around \$4.50 for the first minute. A former state budget analyst, he suspects the jails are profiting from the arrangement.

“This is the most egregious thing that I’ve seen so far,” he said. “There’s no possibility that anybody in their right mind would sign with a phone company out of state that’s going to charge [that much] unless they have some situation where money is coming back to the correctional system.”

According to Colonel Richard Emery, of the Saratoga County Jail, every New York State and county jail is equipped with phones that require inmates to make collect calls to persons “outside,” and which are also equipped with “anti-fraud” devices preventing inmates from making third-person calls -- made in the past to threaten witnesses and continue criminal activity. And in return, the jails are compensated.

Cash Cow?

“Every single county gets a cut,” Emery said, adding that “next to airports, correctional facilities are one of the biggest generators of revenue for the phone companies.”

While the specifics of the deals vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction; in return for giving service providers exclusive contracts to handle outgoing collect calls from correctional facilities, authorities receive lucrative commissions of the revenue garnered by the calls, which can range anywhere between 24 to 45% in New York State.

While contracts routinely go to bidders who can offer the largest returns, as well as support services and technologies such as monitoring apparatuses and computer printouts, the phone companies can pass the costs onto those with little choice in the matter.

"I guess we have a captive audience," said John F. Randolph, Director of Governmental Telecommunications for Suffolk County. "But it's a difficult situation: nobody wants to the prisoners' families to pay [higher costs]."

According to Randolph, rates for prisoners are higher than those for non-incarcerated phone service consumers, but he couldn't provide actual figures. He did note, however, that the current commission for the Suffolk County correctional facilities is approximately 24%, the gross of which goes back into the county general fund.

According to Gerald Norlander, deputy director of the consumer watchdog group Public Utility Law Project, the commissions are profiting at the expense of those who are often unable to pay such rates.

"Why are we putting this extra charge on the people who get calls from inmates, who are typically friends and family?" he asked, hinting at the economic dynamics of the nation's criminal class. "It's not in the interest of society to squeeze \$20 million out of the relatives of 70 thousand prison inmates, or is it?"

Norlander said phone companies routinely advertise to authorities, specifically highlighting services and technologies available. However, he conceded that monies may go toward a wide array of jail services

and maintenance.

"It's the commissions that are the heart of the problem," he said. "It's a practice that grew up with a combination of events and capabilities that haven't been properly outlined."

Outside The Wall

According to Chris O'Brien, deputy executive director of the NYS Sherriffs Association, the sheriffs negotiated a deal with AT&T and Verizon in order to consolidate commission rates and to provide greater call security and anti-fraud provisions. "That was wide open and it was real easy to get outside the wall," he said.

O'Brien insisted that collect calls made by inmates are the same as those made outside the wall. "There must be an error somewhere," he said regarding the higher bills. "If that is true they are violating the agreement."

Ron Essel, Communications Analyst II for Civil Service Communications for Suffolk County said that such operator-assisted calls are typically more expensive, but noted that the sheriffs department is currently negotiating a new phone commission for the county in order to lower the rate, but he couldn't be more specific.

Essel was incredulous at the high costs reported by Santacroce -- he said that the Federal Communication Commission prohibits phone companies from preventing calls from overflowing onto other carriers.

"And their rates are really not regulated to any great extent any longer," he said, adding it is "absolutely not standard" for such high fees to be leveled.

"[Gouging] was never the intent, but because of the changes in the phone regulations, strange things have happened. But I assure you there was no intent on the county's part to make these rates exorbitant."

Randolph suggested that high bills like those received by The Independent's sources are not policy of the phone companies but the result of a practice known in the industry as "slamming," in which "scurrilous" long-distance phone carriers reroute calls. However, judging from complaints by inmates, it seems virtually every phone call made from a prison mysteriously gets re-routed.

"We have over 13,000 land lines for Suffolk," he said. "On occasion we get slammed with a bill that we refuse to pay because there has been an unauthorized changing of the carrier."

Walter Denzler, Corrections Undersherriff for Suffolk County went on further, saying higher rates may be the work of the inmates themselves to circumvent the existing system. "If people are getting bills for collect calls from the jail from other than Verizon, I'd certainly like to know about it," he said.

In the meantime, Santacroce said he'd still accept calls from Michael, regardless of the increased cost, but he wonders about inmates' families who may not be able to afford to keep in touch with loved ones behind bars.

"Are we really helping people?" he asked, "Or are we just putting more ollars in someone's pocket?"