

PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE

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Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Ms. Dortch,

I write to submit to the FCC's record a copy of an article I recently published in *The Huffington Post*, "The Father's Day Profiteers That Put Hallmark to Shame." The article features first-hand accounts from families that are struggling to maintain contact with fathers due to the extremely high cost of prison and jail communications services.

I thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Leah Sakala
Senior Policy Analyst

June 20, 2014

**HUFF
POST** POLITICS

The Father's Day Profiteers That Put Hallmark to Shame

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Image Source via Getty Images

This Sunday, more than a million families will face a huge Father's Day problem, and it's not figuring out which tie pattern dad would like best. It's the astronomical cost of wishing him a Happy Father's Day over the phone if he happens to be one of the 1.2 million parents in prison or jail. That's because the prison telephone industry wants to charge families as much as \$1/minute just to tell incarcerated loved ones that they are loved and missed.

Here's how it works: prisons and jails grant exclusive contracts to private telephone corporations, usually based on which corporation offers to kick back the largest share of the profits. The real consumers -- the families who are paying the bills -- are a captive market that has no choice but to use the correctional facility's chosen vendor if they want to hear a loved one's voice.

More than 2 million kids in the U.S. have a dad in prison or jail. The tens of thousands of petition messages that we collected with SumOfUs calling for Federal Communication Commission (FCC) regulation of the industry include heartbreaking fist-hand accounts of why prison phone justice is a matter of family justice:

- "...because I'm a single mom now, I can't afford to indulge [my daughter] so she can talk to the only man she's ever called Daddy. That is wrong."
- "My little boy turned one today and it cost \$12 for his dad to be able to sing him happy birthday. It's not right that prison phone calls are so overpriced."
- "While [my son's] dad tries to write letters & cards, talking on the phone is a much more accessible way to connect with and develop a semblance of a relationship with a small child. My son rarely gets to talk to his dad anymore..."
- "My son's father has been in prison for most of my son's life. My son has only spoken to his father once in the last 10 years. My son is 14 now. If it were more affordable to speak to his father, perhaps my son would feel like he has some sort of connection with his father."
- "My dad was in jail when I was a child and at this price there is no way my mom would have been able to afford to let me talk to him. Without my dad I would not be who I am today."

The outrageous cost of prison and jail phone calls is also a Father's Day issue for incarcerated family members, many of whom won't be able to afford to call the important dads in their lives on Sunday:

- "2 years ago, I was in jail where my mother, who lives locally, was charged \$12.95 per phone call, whether we stayed on the phone for 15 minutes or not. I couldn't call my father because out-of-state rates were far too much... He didn't hear from me for a few months because I couldn't afford to call him and let him know what was going on."
- "My wife is currently incarcerated for minor, non-violent crimes. I'm now essentially a single father and I can only speak to my wife twice a month because of the insanely high cost of calling from a prison."

Families have been struggling with the high cost of calling home from prison or jail for over a decade. Last August, the Federal Communications Commission finally approved regulations to bring down the astronomical phone bills families are forced to pay for the most expensive calls that cross state lines. The 80 percent of calls that are *in-state* are still unregulated by the FCC, however, and the prison and jail telephone corporations are already suing to overturn the FCC's preliminary ruling.

Beyond the FCC's action, state and local government bodies also have the power to protect their own residents from corporate prison and jail phone call price gouging. New York, for example, decided that basic family communication was no longer a luxury item in 2007 when the state prison system banned kickbacks and capped calling rates (and last July, told the FCC what a good idea that decision turned out to be). More recently, the Alabama Public Service Commission proposed some of the strongest regulation we've seen.

The prison telephone industry is complicated and regulatory discussions dive deep in the technical weeds, but at the end of the day it all comes down to one fundamental question:

Should prison and jail phone corporations be allowed to rake in windfall profits by forcing families to choose between staying in touch with a loved one and putting food on the table?

At the Prison Policy Initiative, we think that the answer is a resounding "no!" Families need comprehensive prison and jail phone industry regulation, and hopefully this Sunday will be the last Father's Day when families won't be able to afford to tell dads that they are loved.

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