

## Seriously? 30 Cents Per Minute?

Written by Foster Campbell  
Monday, 08 October 2012 08:19 -

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### Outrageous rates being charged to families of inmates



The Louisiana Public Service Commission is investigating exorbitant telephone rates charged to families of inmates in Louisiana jails and prisons.

What we have found suggests that rates for calls from inmates to their families and fees added to bills are extreme compared to rates for calls on the outside.

These high charges raise legal and moral issues. The commission is asking whether the rates and add-on fees are authorized under our current regulations.

From a moral and practical standpoint, the issue is whether these high phone fees prevent inmates from communicating with family members on the outside. Corrections experts agree that family connections are vital to the rehabilitation of inmates and their ability to adjust to life after prison.

Nearly 40,000 people are incarcerated on a long-term basis in Louisiana prisons. A state Department of Corrections official recently told a legislative committee that Louisiana is “number one in the world” in incarceration.

There are more than 170 state and local prisons in Louisiana -- 11 operated by the Louisiana DOC and more than 160 run by parish and city governments.

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Prisoners and their families have no choice on the company they use to communicate. That choice is made by the state DOC, the local sheriff or the jail operator.

Rates are very high.

A 10-minute daytime call from Shreveport to Natchitoches is \$4.65.

A 10-minute daytime call from Baton Rouge to Gonzales is \$4.65.

A 10-minute daytime call from the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison to a house across the street is \$1.81.

The average cost of all calls from prisons in Louisiana exceeds \$3 for a 10-minute call. That is 30 cents a minute -- compared to 2 cents on the outside.

Other southern states are lower than Louisiana. Texas is about \$2.68 for the average 10-minute call and Florida is about \$1.21.

New York is the lowest cost for that average 10-minute call at 48 cents – 4.8 cents a minute.

Jail telephone companies often add questionable charges on top of these high rates. For example, families are charged for opening a telephone account (\$6.95) or getting a refund for unused calling time (\$5).

The commission is investigating whether these added charges violate PSC orders.

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The vast majority of inmate calls are completed by the provider companies using “Voice Over Internet Protocol” technology. VOIP is far less costly to operate than earlier telephone “switch” technology.

Some legitimate oversight functions required by jail operators tend to drive up the cost of prison telephone services.

These are mostly designed to prevent fraud and keep prisoners from conducting criminal activity by telephone.

Typically it is the prisoner’s mother, father, children or grandparents who pay for these calls, not the prisoner. Our investigation suggests that relatives of inmates are paying a dear price to stay in contact with family members in jail.

When the same calls on the outside can be made for as little as two cents a minute, it appears that the inmate telephone providers are taking advantage of their monopoly status.

Investigations of inmate telephone systems in other states have revealed that the firms that provide phone services to jails often pay big commissions to win their monopoly contracts.

These other states have concluded that jail operators often choose the high bidder rather than the low bidder for telephone services. In other words, the highest commission paid to the jail.

Other states have lowered rates by changing how commissions are paid, or prohibiting them entirely. New York lawmakers banned commissions in 2008 and rates dropped 69 percent.

If exclusive deals between telephone companies and jails result in mothers not being able to communicate with their sons and daughters in prison, the Louisiana PSC is not doing its job as a regulator.

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The LPSC investigated inmate calling services in the early 1990s and found widespread abuses. Customers had been double-billed, charged exorbitant rates and had time illegally added to their calls.

The commission ordered more than a million dollars in refunds.

The reprimand did not slow down the provider in that case, a company called Global Tel-Link. It now has state corrections contracts in 19 states. Until recently it provided exclusive phone services to the 11 prisons operated by the Louisiana DOC.

In the world outside prison, the cost to make telephone calls is declining thanks to technological improvements and new forms of competition. On the inside, high prices for calls prevent inmates from remaining in contact with parents, spouses and children, and make it more difficult for them to adjust to life on the outside when they are released from jail.

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