

Prison Phone Rates Under Scrutiny



The Louisiana Public Service Commission (PSC) is examining the rates for phone calls made by prisoners. To help it in that determination, the PSC has hired outside counsel to analyze rates, review regulations and compare them with other states to decide if they are "just, fair and reasonable."

PLN previously reported that states receive an average of 41.9% of the gross revenue from prisoner calls in kickbacks from phone service providers. The only thing that controls the high rates for prison phone calls is "pure, unabated greed by both the phone companies" and state prison systems. [See: PLN, April 2011, p.1].

In Louisiana the kickback is 55% of gross prison phone revenue. "A lot of people think this is grossly unfair," said PSC Commissioner Foster Campbell, a former state senator. "This affects a lot of families in Louisiana."

Prisoners at the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison pay \$1.31 for the first five minutes of a local call and \$.50 for each five-minute period thereafter, or \$2.31 for a 15-minute call. According to Pam Laborde, spokeswoman for the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, the cost for collect intrastate calls averages \$5.55.

Laborde touted that as a good deal when compared to the prison phone rates in Texas and Mississippi. She noted that for 15-minute calls in Mississippi, the charge is \$2.85 for a local call and \$14.55 for long distance. A call of the same length in Texas costs \$3.90 if local and \$6.45 for long distance.

Louisiana's contract with Global Tel*Link generated \$3.3 million for the state in prison phone kickbacks in FY 2010. Over the last three years the state has reaped \$10.2 million in kickbacks.

Local sheriffs are also profiting from phone calls made by prisoners. For example, the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office has a contract with American Phone Service that pays the sheriff 48% of gross revenue, amounting to \$620,000 in the last fiscal year.

Former state senator Cleo Fields had attempted to pass legislation to end the state's profiteering from prison phone services. "Obviously, the Louisiana Sheriff's Association opposed the bill vigorously," he said. "They felt it would be an infringement on their revenues. My argument is they shouldn't use those types of revenues to balance their budget."

Louisiana's Corrections Secretary, Jimmy LeBlanc, admitted that prison phone revenue was integral to the department's operation. "It would be a major impact if we had to cut \$3.3 million from our budget," he observed.

One phone company executive said prison and jail officials encourage higher rates. "There is some pressure from individual counties, states and parishes to get the commissions as high as possible, and who can blame them? They are trying to run a jail and revenues are down," said Curt Selman, CEO of Payphones of Arkansas, LLC.

Campbell implied that it's immoral to fund prisons and jails through phone revenue that is largely paid by prisoners' family members. "You should do the human thing and let the man talk to his wife and children. It shouldn't cost him an arm and a leg," he said.

Meanwhile, Fields saw a problem with private companies profiting from prisoners. "We've got to take the profit out of prisons, period," he stated. "At this point, it's profitable to incarcerate people. It should not be a way to make money." ■

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