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KICKBACKS EXPLOIT INMATES' FAMILIES

In Cook County jails, prisoners are charged as much as \$15 a call to be in touch with their relatives. The exploitive rates can force families — already struggling with the burdens of having a loved one locked up — to choose between supporting their loved one or paying for heat or food. An Illinois study found that the price of phone calls from prison was one of the two most significant barriers to family contact during incarceration.

Why are the most captive and vulnerable

being charged such brutal rates for a phone call? Because they can be. They have no choice in provider. The prison system cuts a deal with a telephone company that pays the state a “commission” — what the New York Times calls a “legalized kickback” — that ranges from 15 to 60 percent of the revenue. Thus, as a report by the Prison Policy Initiative details, state prison systems have no incentive to select the company with the lowest rates. Instead, the correctional departments gain the most by selecting the company that provides the highest commissions.

The result makes prison-telephone use a cash cow for the phone companies — and a brutal exploitation of the families of prisoners who pay the charges. Not surprisingly, over the past few years, three corporations have come to monopolize the service of 90 percent of all incarcerated persons, making it even easier to control rates.

The Cook County Jail contract is with Securus Technologies. The Dallas-based company has contracts across the state of Illinois, and with a total of 2,200 jails and prisons nationwide, provides phone service for some 850,000 inmates. Securus peddles its service by emphasizing that the prison systems can

make money for the prison systems.

These outrageous rates make it harder for prisoners and their families to stay in touch. Yet studies show that family contact and support is directly related to the success of a prisoner after release. As the Prison Policy Initiative reports, the 2012 Republican Party Platform endorses “family friendly policies . . . [to] reduce the rate of recidivism, thus reducing the enormous fiscal and social costs of incarceration.” The 2012 Democratic Party Platform also supports initiatives to reduce recidivism. A sensible step would be to lower prison telephone rates.

According to the Center for Media Justice, eight states have passed laws banning jail phone contracts that generate revenue for government bodies. But the Federal Communications Commission has been dithering for nearly a decade on regulations that would either break up monopolies or impose price caps on long-distance prison telephone rates and put a lid on the price-gouging. But action has been delayed in wake of an aggressive lobbying effort by prison phone companies.

The phone companies and prison officials argue that the extra charges are needed

to pay for security screening of inmates' calls. But New York State banned kickbacks years ago, requiring low-cost service, while doing screening. Currently Global Tel-Link charges New York prisoners and their families about 5 cents per minute for local and long-distance calls. Compare that with Georgia, where inmates pay \$17 a minute for a 15-minute long-distance call. Again, by contrast, the federal prison system has inexpensive phone service, using a computer-controlled system that enables inmates to place calls to a limited list of numbers.

Some 60 percent of our nation's inmates are poor. If families accept their collect calls, the burdensome charges — it can cost less to telephone Japan — can help push families into bankruptcy or foreclosure. If families don't accept the calls, they are consumed by guilt and contribute to the psychological isolation that can thwart rehabilitation.

Rep. Bobby Rush from Illinois and Rep. Henry Waxman from California have joined in calling on the FCC to act. It's time to end a shameless system that benefits a few big corporations at the expense of the poor families trying to support loved ones in trouble.