

LETTERS

Costly prison phone calls are another kind of punishment

Updated July 27, 2020, 7:15 a.m.



Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson heads down from the top of a two-tiered cellblock at the Bristol County House of Corrections. GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY STAN GROSSFELD

Now, more than ever, family communication is a lifeline

Re [“Calling home: A hardship for prisoners, a boon to Bristol County sheriff”](#) (Editorial, July 21): The US District Court’s ruling, upholding the right of Commonwealth sheriffs to exploit families with incarcerated loved ones, is devastating. Communication is now, more than ever, a

lifeline for incarcerated people, especially with visits suspended. Amid a health pandemic and a growing economic crisis, the decision is a travesty.

Last week, [Federal Communications Commission chair Ajit Pai issued a strongly worded statement](#), lamenting the limitations of the FCC to regulate what he called “egregious” prison and jail phone call rates and urging states to do so themselves. The statement marks a stark shift for the conservative, pro-industry commissioner that illustrates the gravity of the harm these rates cause families.

Massachusetts must answer Pai’s call and put an end to the plundering of already economically marginalized families. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth’s Department of Telecommunications and Cable has also struggled to regulate prison and jail call rates due to a slight nuance in the agency’s authority.

Fortunately, there is still another way: a bill introduced by Senator William Brownsberger that would [make calls free for incarcerated people and their loved ones](#). There is no one else to pass the buck to. Protecting families now rests on the Legislature. It must pass this bill quickly.

Bianca Tylek

Executive director

Worth Rises

New York

Mass. lawmakers could right this wrong

The Globe editorial’s outrage at the cost of prison phone calls is echoed by everyone with a family member who is incarcerated.

Imagine going through this pandemic paying \$5.40 for a 15-minute call from a Bristol county jail, or \$4.50 from a Barnstable or Dukes county facility. Fifteen minutes goes very quickly when each child wants to speak to their parent, and you too need time to talk.

The exorbitant rates charged by prison phone companies such as Securus include a kickback, termed a “commission,” for the county sheriffs — 85 percent for Barnstable, 76 percent for Plymouth, for example — paid for by families, one in three of whom goes into debt over phone calls.

However, this is one criminal justice problem with an immediate solution.

A Senate bill under consideration right now in the Legislature would bring free calls to those held in our prisons and jails. New York City, with a similar correctional budget of \$1.4 billion, introduced free calls, the cost of which, without commissions, they likened to a “rounding error.”

Phone calls, so important any time, are vital in this frightening time with no visitation allowed. Let us hope that this legislation passes.

Christine McArdle

Brookline

The writer is a member of MA Prison Phone Justice.

Shift cost burden off of struggling families

At this time in particular, with all that is going on, phone calls are a lifeline for inmates and families. Keeping family connections is crucial to successful reentry into society. The burden on all families now is huge, and financial concerns are everywhere. With no in-person visits allowed at this time, it is time to make all phone calls free so that families can keep in touch.

Going forward, calls should stay free. The cost burden needs to be shifted off of families who are now struggling.

When families stay connected, it helps society and makes us all safer.

Mary Valerio

Clinton

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