

Rep. Baldeh: Urges to end unfair and harmful phone charges in county jails with new legislative proposal

Posted on Wednesday, Dec 8, 2021

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Some Wisconsin county jails charge inmates' families the highest rates in the nation. For example, Portage and Monroe counties charges inmate families \$13.65 for a 15-minute local call. In a survey of over 30 counties, the average charge was \$7.65 for a 15 minute phone call.

State Representative Samba Baldeh (D-Madison) has proposed legislation to end "this shameful practice" where those who are often poorest people in the community are subject to inflated phone charges. He noted:

It is inmate families, not the inmates themselves that pay these extortion-like phone charges. The three phone companies that dominate this market along with some counties exploit the desperate situation where jail inmates need to stay in contact with their loved ones.

Maintaining regular communication between inmates and their family is key staying out of jail in the future. The costs imposed by a handful of companies in league with these counties cuts off communication when it is most desperately needed. Our communities pay the price for it.

Rep. Baldeh noted that the Wisconsin Dept. of Corrections has recognized the need for prisoners to stay in contact and charges only 90 cents (\$.90) for a 15-minute call. Some states have eliminated all charges or charge the actual amount for the cost of call which is estimated at about 4 cents per minute.

These overcharges are the burden of family members- wives, husbands, parents and children. These are the people who are penalized. During the first year of the pandemic, the state DOC did the right thing and ended in-person visits. But they also did the right thing and temporarily ended phone charges. New York, California, Alabama have effectively ended phone charges. The FCC has limited the cost of an interstate call to 14 cents per minute or \$2.10 for a 15-minute call.

My colleagues and I believe that a person who is in jail should not have to pay more for a local phone call in a county jail than it does if lived anywhere else in the county. Indeed, on average it costs more to make a local call from a county jail (\$7.65) than it does to make an interstate call (which is regulated by the FCC).

Senator LaTonya Johnson (D-Milwaukee) who authored the Senate version of the bill added:

Standardizing phone charges in our state's prisons and jails, and bringing them in line with market costs will end this cruel practice of price gouging inmates and their families who are simply trying to stay connected while incarcerated. It will make our correctional system more humane, and I believe, more effective at helping these individuals to rebuild their lives and stay out of trouble in the future."

The three national telecom companies providing "correctional services" earned over \$1.4 billion in revenue in 2020. They then buy time from a national telecom such as Sprint for pennies on the dollar earned.

These companies typically enter into agreements with counties that provide "kickbacks" such as 50% "commissions" on calls and "signing bonuses" that can go into the six figures. Some sheriffs have argued that they use these "commissions" for "special services" for inmates such as a TV in common area but there is rarely an accounting for these funds.

The inmates and families are literally captive consumers who must purchase from a single seller- the county and the telecom. Also, it is important to note that most inmates in county jails are awaiting trial, are unable to pay bail and have not been

convicted of a crime.