

**STATEMENT OF  
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Rates for Interstate Inmate Calling Services*, WC Docket No. 12-375, Third Report and Order, Order on Reconsideration, and Fifth Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (May 20, 2021).

One of the hard life lessons that the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us is how crucial it is to be able to connect with loved ones both near and far, even when you're unable to see them in person. That reality has been felt deeply by the more than two million incarcerated individuals throughout the United States. As prisons and jails across this nation temporarily ceased visitation to help stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, incarcerated people became solely dependent on Inmate Calling Services (ICS) to remain connected to those outside the walls of correctional facilities. For many incarcerated individuals, the price to connect with their loved ones, no matter how frequent or infrequent, is far too costly. But the price to remain unconnected is just as costly because there is an increased risk of recidivism, deteriorating mental health, and lost connections with children which impact incarcerated individuals, their families, and society as a whole.

As we continue to hear resounding calls for equity and justice for our most marginalized communities, the Order before us today serves as a reminder that our long-standing fight for prison phone justice continues. The lowering of interstate rate caps at prisons and large jails is a step in the right direction. These interstate rate caps and additional reforms are being set on an *interim* basis and because of that I am hopeful there will be opportunities to further meet the Commission's obligation of ensuring there truly are *just and reasonable* charges made to incarcerated individuals and their loved ones who are using ICS services to remain connected. It is imperative that we obtain accurate data and clearly establish the costs of running a correctional facility versus the true costs of running a communications service.

I was pleased to see the Acting Chair's office accept my change to ensure that international call termination charges are transparent to consumers. Transparency is an important part of ensuring incarcerated individuals and their families and friends are charged reasonable rates, including during international calls.

As noted in this Order, there are additional challenges that incarcerated individuals with disabilities face in their quest to remain connected as they are often subject to what disability-rights advocates have called a "prison within a prison."<sup>1</sup> With today's action, we reaffirm ICS providers' obligations to ensure services and equipment are accessible and usable by incarcerated people with disabilities. I am also pleased to see the robust Further Notice that seeks comment on the provision of functionally equivalent communications services to incarcerated people with hearing and speech disabilities.

We are here today, as we have been with many moments in history concerning justice in this country, because of a path paved by Black women including Martha Wright and former FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn who have long led the way in the fight against exorbitant ICS rates. We are also here today because of the efforts of prison phone justice advocates and disability rights advocates who have played an integral role in this process and will continue to work with us on permanent relief solutions.

Thank you also to the Commission's staff for your hard work on this Order and for continuing to make an impact in the lives of incarcerated individuals and their loved ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Novic, *Deaf prisoners are trapped in frightening isolation*, CNN (June 21, 2018), <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/21/opinions/aclu-georgia-deaf-abuse-lawsuit-novic>.