

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL**

Re: *Incarcerated People's Communications Services; Implementation of the Martha Wright-Reed Act*, WC Docket No. 23-62; *Rates for Interstate Inmate Calling Services*, WC Docket No. 12-375, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking and Order (March 16, 2023).

It was twenty years ago a grandmother named Martha filed a petition calling on the Federal Communications Commission to do something about the unconscionably high phone rates charged to incarcerated people and their loved ones. You see, she just wanted to stay in touch with her grandson, who was in prison. She wanted to make sure he heard what was happening at home and in her church and that he kept in contact with his young nephews.

Justice delayed can be justice denied. And it took this agency far too long to pick up that petition. It took us longer still to act on it and try to address the outrageous charges families of the incarcerated pay for phone service. When we did, we made headway. We cut rates for calls. We limited ancillary service fees. We put restrictions on site commissions. But our work was not always embraced by the courts. We were told—over and over again—that we did not have the authority to address every aspect of these rates, because while interstate calls fell within our jurisdiction, intrastate calls did not. This limited our ability to provide families relief and meaningfully address that petition filed so long ago.

No more. At the start of this year, President Biden signed into law the Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act. It is a piece of legislation that honors the trailblazing work of a grandmother who knew something was wrong and set out to make it right.

In the United States we are home to the largest incarcerated population in the world. No other country comes close. We spend so much to keep our criminal justice system in place. But that understates the real cost—swelling despair, destroyed potential, and diminished possibilities for rehabilitation. And phone calls, simple as they are, are important. Because those in prison are often separated from their families by hundreds of miles and families may lack the time and means to make regular visits. Phone calls are the only way to stay connected. But when the price of a single phone call can be as much as most of us spend for unlimited monthly plans, it can be hard to stay in touch. This is not just a strain on the household budget. It harms all of us because regular contact with kin can reduce recidivism.

We are now due for some speed. We are going to use this new law and the expanded authority it provides to ensure the rates for prison phone calls—both interstate and intrastate—are just and reasonable. We are going to use it to address advanced communications services like video. And we are going to use it to ensure access to these communications by those with disabilities. Along the way, we will work to integrate these new efforts with what we have done before, so that across the board these policies are fair and sustainable.

Like I said, we are going to move fast. Because the Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act demands we produce results between 18 and 24 months after enactment and too many have waited too long for us to address these usurious rates.

Martha Wright-Reed passed away eight years ago. But we would not be here today without her. We also would not be here without the work of my friend and former colleague Mignon Clyburn who was the one to tell this agency to pick up that petition. Her conscience informs this proceeding and everything in this new law.

Thank you also to the Congressional leaders who worked for years on this new law, putting a more just system within reach, including Senator Tammy Duckworth and former Congressman Bobby Rush, as well as the many co-sponsors of this legislation. Thank you also to the advocates who supported this effort and the work of this agency. We would not be here without you.

In addition to these leaders, I want to thank the Commission staff for their continued efforts to

this work, including Susan Bahr, Ahuva Battams, Peter Bean, Callie Coker, Victoria Goldberg, Amy Goodman, Trent Harkrader, William Kehoe, Lee McFarland, Stephen Meil, Terri Natoli, Simon Solemani, Hayley Steffen, Gil Strobel, Jennifer Best Vickers, and David Zesiger from the Wireline Competition Bureau; Robert Aldrich, Diane Burstein, Darryl Cooper, Aaron Garza, Eliot Greenwald, Alejandro Roark, and Michael Scott from the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau; Connor Altman, Amanda Betag, Paula Cech, Zaira Gonzalez, Eugene Kiselev, Richard Kwiatkowski, Giulia McHenry, Eric Ralph, Michelle Schaefer, and Geoff Waldau from the Office of Economics and Analytics; Sarah Citrin, Michele Ellison, Valerie Hill, Marcus Maher, Richard Mallen, Joel Rabinovitz, William Richardson, and Chin Yoo from the Office of General Counsel; Jim Balaguer and Brian Moulton from the Office of Legislative Affairs; Anne Veigle and Will Wiquist from the Office of Media Relations; and Cara Grayer, Michael Gussow, and Joy Ragsdale from the Office of Communications Business Opportunities.