

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

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).

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Famous words from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

More than 20 years ago, Mrs. Martha Wright-Reed began her fight for affordable and fair rates for communications services for incarcerated individuals and their families. Many of you know her story, but it is worthwhile to revisit it briefly. As a blind, elderly woman, her options to stay in touch with her grandson were limited when he was moved to a correctional facility in Arizona, some 2000 miles from her home in Washington, DC. Without the ability to communicate via letters or in-person, her only option to stay in contact was via a weekly phone call on Sunday after church. Calling her grandson a few times a month turned out to be a struggle—the per-minute rates were very expensive on top of various fees that added up to hundreds of dollars a month. She was forced to decide between staying in touch with her grandson, providing him a connection to the outside world, and paying for her other expenses like medication and groceries. Sometimes something had to give. It was never her connection with her grandson.

But here’s what she realized—if she was struggling to afford paying for these calls, surely other families were as well. Over the next 23 years, what started with her personal phone bill turned into a nationwide movement dedicated to lowering the communication rates in incarceration facilities. When Wright-Reed started her efforts, a call from Washington to an incarceration facility in California used to cost as much as \$17 for 15 minutes. That same call can now be as low as \$3-4 dollars.

The Commission has worked, going back to then Commissioner Mignon Clyburn’s leadership nearly 10 years ago, to stop exorbitant charges. However, the Commission was at the time limited in what it could do with regard to the rates for intrastate calls, which represent over 80% of total calls from incarceration facilities.¹ Following Wright-Reed’s passing in 2015, others picked up her mantle, including Senator Duckworth alongside her co-sponsors, Senators Blumenthal, Booker, Casey, Coons, Gillibrand, King, Klobuchar, Lujan, Markey, Portman, Schatz, Warren, and Wyden, and Congressman Rush. And last year, Congress passed the Martha Wright-Reed Act which, for the first time, gives the FCC authority to regulate intrastate rates at incarceration facilities.

By clearly extending the Commission’s authority over intrastate communications services, we can now work towards ensuring that rates charged are just and reasonable, consistent with the Commission’s standard in Section 202. This is a huge step.

Equally important, the Martha Wright-Reed Act expands our authority to ensure that rates are just and reasonable for advanced communications systems—such as video visitation services—that many incarcerated persons and correctional facilities use to stay connected while also protecting security.

Ensuring that rates for advanced communications services offered to incarcerated individuals are just is also long overdue to support incarcerated populations that are deaf and hard of hearing or face other communications disabilities. Last September, we adopted a *Report and Order and Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*² focused specifically on ensuring that incarcerated people with communications disabilities have functionally equivalent services as those without disabilities. The Martha Wright-Reed

¹ Shira Hoffer, *Mother or Money? The Exorbitant Cost of Phone Calls from Jail*, HARVARD POLITICAL REVIEW (Jan. 15, 2022), <https://harvardpolitics.com/jail-phone-calls>.

² *Rates for Interstate Inmate Calling Services*, WC Docket No. 12-375, Fourth Report and Order and Sixth Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, FCC 22-76 (2022).

Act will help ensure the advanced communications services, such as IP CTS, will be charged at a just and reasonable rate, and help support that proceeding as well.

Martha Wright-Reed's call to action moved our world. Millions of incarcerated individuals, their families, and our society are all beneficiaries of her powerful work. What a legacy.

I look forward to seeing the record develop from the Notice as we work to implement the Act. I applaud the Commission's fantastic staff for their dedicated work on this issue, as well as Commissioner Clyburn and Chairwoman Rosenworcel's continued leadership. I strongly approve.