



Your California Privacy Rights Interest Based Ads

Privacy Notice Advertising Terms of Use Contact Us



IMAGE 1 OF 24

The Texas prison board approved a lower cost phone contract on Friday.

AUSTIN - The Texas prison system on Friday voted to drastically slash the cost of inmate calls home by more than 75 percent with a new phone contract more favorable to inmates and their families.

Now, instead of paying an average of 26 cents per minute, prisoners will pay 6 cents per minute - no matter the destination of the call. Also, the limit on phone calls was increased from 20 minutes to 30 minutes.

"That is just fabulous, thank you so much - it means so much," said Jennifer Erschabek of the Texas Inmate Families Association. "I'm speechless."

**WHO IS SHE? Authorities seek identity of barefoot woman on surveillance video**

ADVERTISING



The shift, which drew accolades from lawmakers and activists alike, comes amid national conversations about the price of prison phone calls. Last year, a federal court struck down an Obama-era Federal Communications Commission rule that would have

capped the costs at 11 cents per minute.

X

[Your California Privacy Rights](#)   [Interest Based Ads](#)

[Privacy Notice](#)   [Advertising](#)   [Terms of Use](#)   [Contact Us](#)

Though that was seen as a blow to the hard-fought efforts of inmate advocates nationwide, Friday's contract approval represented a win for advocates in the Lone Star State.

"This should have done it a long time ago," said state Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston. "I've raised hell for years about how they were gouging inmates and their families."

Currently, a 15-minute call usually costs around \$3.90, officials said at the Texas Board of Criminal Justice meeting.

Starting Sept. 1 when the new contract takes effect, a typical 15-minute call will cost just 90 cents.

#### **A NEW TUNE: Texas prison choir keys in on redemption**

Doug Smith, a former prisoner who now works with the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, lauded the new pricing as an important way to help inmates stay in touch with family on the outside, a connection that advocates say can help reduce recidivism and facilitate reentry.

"I'm so happy for the families who struggle to afford these phone calls," he said. "Now there's going to be parents who can afford to call home and maybe help with their kids' homework."

State Rep. James White, the East Texas Republican who chairs the House Committee on Corrections, concurred, praising the board and prison system executive director Bryan Collier.

"They are making some very, very significant changes that will impact recidivism, rehabilitation and ultimately will increase safe communities in Texas," he said. "I'm extremely, extremely proud of them helping us out today."

Earlier this month, White penned a letter to Collier expressing his concerns about the existing offender telephone system contract and advocating for a most affordable arrangement. He raised concerns about the previous contract, which made out-of-state calls cheaper than a call to family in Sunnyside, and he dinged the Texas legislature for benefiting from the arrangement.

As mandated by state law, the contractor gets 60 percent of the phone revenue and the state gets 40 percent. Of that 40 percent, the first \$10 million must go to the Texas Crime Victims Compensation Fund. After that first \$10 million, half goes to the victims fund and the other half goes to the state's general fund.

During fiscal year 2017, the phone system brought in \$14.49 million for the victim fund and \$4.49 million for general revenue, according to department data. x

[Your California Privacy Rights](#) [Interest Based Ads](#)

[Privacy Notice](#) [Advertising](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Contact Us](#)

"Although legislated decades ago," White wrote, "it is intriguing why the Legislature is benefiting from this scheme and this may receive some legislative attention next session."

Because that distribution of proceeds is mandated by law, it could not be addressed through contractual negotiations, which were hammered out after a request for proposal and months of evaluation.

CenturyLink, the current contract holder and a major prison phone provider in corrections systems across the country, was awarded the seven-year contract.

"The new (offender telephone system) contract is going to benefit not only family of offenders who are hoping to stay connected, but enhance the agency's focus on re-entry," Collier said in a statement. "The system is used to maintain relationships with friends and family that are a vital part of a successful re-entry and reintegration of offenders into the community."

More than 127,000 prisoners currently make use of the phone system, and 172,000 friends and families are signed up to receive roughly 1.5 million calls per month from behind bars.

As a part of the new contract, CenturyLink will update existing hardware and also install new technology for video visitation at 12 units, according to prison officials. The new hardware will allow families to contact their loved ones from further away, but officials said it won't replace in-person visits.

© 2018 Hearst Communications, Inc.

**HEARST**

PP