

Monday, April 16, 2007

Gouging inmates to call their families.

Absent extreme circumstances, nothing justifies shutting off inmates from the outside world. (Image from Bureau of Prisons' website). Every month, one of the largest chunks of our law firm's phone bill is for calls from inmates seeking our services, awaiting trials, or in the appellate process. The huge fees billed for inmate collect calls seem to be without rhyme or reason. Some -- if not all -- state governments apparently earn a hefty profit from the collect call overbilling. Families of inmates take a huge hit in the wallet from these overpriced collect phone calls. Many inmates -- even ones presumed innocent and awaiting trials -- are shipped to jails and prisons far from their families and lawyers (repeatedly to other states, in the case of federal convicts) and far from the courthouses handling their cases. The vast majority of inmates will eventually be released from incarceration. Allowing them more affordable contact with their families is a critical safety valve for making a smoother transition back to the street, and even for making prisons and jails more manageable for jailers, because happier inmates are more manageable inmates. In New York, the Center for Constitutional Rights has filed suit over this inmate collect call price gouging. Credit goes to New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, who, effective the beginning of April, eliminated the requirement for MCI and Verizon to pay a whopping 57% of its profits to the New York state government. Here is additional commentary on inmate phone-gate. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Constitutional Law at 00:00