

OPINION

Isolation on Both Ends of the Line

The steep cost of staying in touch

BY CHANCELLAR WILLIAMS

When Martha Wright's grandson went to prison more than 20 years ago, she learned a stark lesson about the cost of maintaining ties with a family member who is incarcerated.



Wright is partially blind, so traveling to see her grandson or writing a letter weren't realistic options. She had to rely on phone calls.

She soon noticed that her phone bill jumped from \$50 to \$75, and then to nearly \$200. As someone living on a fixed income, Wright eventually had to reject some of the calls from her grandson just to avoid high bills. Imagine the pain of rejecting a phone call without the opportunity to explain the circumstances. Imagine the isolation that creates on both ends of the line.

Beyond the isolation and deep wound of being separated from a loved one, there's also a very steep price to staying in touch. The children, parents, siblings, and grandparents of the incarcerated spend as much as \$17 for a 15-minute phone call with their loved ones behind bars. And the people who benefit the most from maintaining connections are often those who can least afford the excessive price tag.

Wright lives in Washington, D.C., and that's where she resided when her grandson Ulandis Forte was sent to prison in Lorton, Va.

The current structure allows pris-

ons to solicit bids from multiple companies. You might presume that prisons would choose the lowest bid to contain costs. But the opposite is true.

In a complete distortion of free-market economics, the phone companies that secure contracts with prisons are often the ones that charge more than their competitors. Their high bids are artificially inflated beyond what it costs to provide service because they include a "commission" that goes directly back to the prison.

As a result, consumers pay up to 60 percent more than the actual cost of service, according to research by the independent magazine Prison Legal News.

There's no state or federal oversight of these commissions, which is why Wright led a class action suit filed in 2000. In 2001, a judge referred the case to the Federal Communications Commission, cit-

ing the agency's jurisdiction over the regulation of interstate telephone service. This referral became known as the Wright Petition, which seeks a restructuring of long-distance calling service for incarcerated people.

Rep. Bobby Rush, D-Ill., even introduced the Family Telephone Connection Protection Act in 2007 to create rules to regulate rates, but it didn't pass. He has remained committed to the cause and joined forces with Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., to submit a letter to the FCC in September urging them to act.

Lawmakers, organizations that span the political spectrum, and concerned members of the public have all criticized the FCC's inaction to no avail. It is a true miscarriage of justice that the government has left the incarcerated and their families on hold for more than a decade.

Martha Wright's grandson is now

a free man. But even though she no longer has to struggle with the unfair cost of prison phone calls, her commitment to the cause remains. She's inspiring a movement to bring justice to families who desire simple fairness.

Mignon Clyburn, an FCC commissioner, recently said she was proud to stand with Wright in her fight for those "who remain desperate to hear the voices of their incarcerated loved ones on a regular basis." Now it's time for the rest of the FCC commissioners to hear this call and pass the Wright Petition. Justice has been delayed for far too long.

Chancellor Williams is the government and external affairs manager for Free Press, a non-profit organization advocating for universal and affordable Internet access, diverse media ownership, vibrant public media, and quality journalism.

America: One Nation under Surveillance

Tracking your every move

BY WILLIAM A. COLLINS

Does it matter that the federal government can track your cell phone at any moment of the day? That protesting at an event where the Secret Service is present is now a felony? That any American can be jailed indefinitely without charge or trial? That you can suddenly be kept off all airplanes without being given a reason, forever?

Well, yes, those things matter a great deal. They are the stuff of a police state. They usually pose a

danger to other nations and impose a great burden on their own citizens.

People subjected to such oppression elsewhere have often come to America to escape it.

In terms of surveillance, the cell phone is the instrument of choice in tracking your every move, but even leaving it home is no sure fix. City governments from Hartford, Conn., to Oakland, Calif. have pushed (with varying degrees of success) to install cameras at intersections to photograph your vehicle. They say it's in case you run a red light. But groups like the American Civil Liberties Union warn they could empower the authorities to

check on where you've been.

And if you happen to march against prominent politicians, particularly on matters like war and peace or bank impunity, heaven help you. No longer are there firm laws to protect such complainers.

Police can chase you away, steal your belongings, read your mail, listen to your phone, and lock you up. Their mission is to preserve order, deter terrorists, stifle protest, and protect elected leaders from embarrassment.

Of course if you're Muslim, privacy remains simply a dream. Your mosque is under surveillance, your person is racially profiled, and boarding an airplane can be a tension-filled adventure. Needless to

say, it's best not to wear a headscarf.

Most ominous of all these trends is the latest version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which outlines each year how the Pentagon's budget will be divvied up and sets out operational policies.

The latest version, with bipartisan support, basically empowers the military to detain anybody it wants, at any time, with no formal charge, for as long as it desires. Nor is this power limited to foreign battlefields — it also covers American soil.

While the corporate-owned media remain docile and rarely report on these issues, the Constitution is shivering in its frame.

Alert citizens have filed a lawsuit.

A federal judge initially granted an injunction against indefinite detention practices while the suit was in the courts. But on Oct. 2 the government's stay on that injunction, granted earlier this year, was extended, clearing the way for indefinite detentions.

Spying, eavesdropping, seizure, and detention are the new modes of American security. Old-fashioned dissent is apparently far too dangerous. As a new bumper sticker reads: "America, One Nation, Under Surveillance."

OtherWords columnist William A. Collins is a former state representative and a former mayor of Norwalk, Conn.

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