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**Written Testimony of Karina Wilkinson**

March 5, 2013

To the New Jersey State Senate Budget Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on phone rates in correctional facilities. My name is Karina Wilkinson, with New Jersey Advocates for Immigrant Detainees and the Monmouth County Coalition for Immigrant Rights (MCCIR). The NJ Advocates is an alliance of civic and religious organizations devoted to improving conditions for immigrant detainees and advocating for the end of immigration detention<sup>1</sup>, and MCCIR is a member group.

The NJ Advocates have been working in coalition to end exorbitant phone rates for all people held at correctional facilities in New Jersey, but I will focus on the plight of immigrant detainees.

On any given day, as many as 2,250 immigrant detainees can be held in seven facilities in New Jersey under contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Unlike state and county inmates, immigrant detainees can be in Newark ICE or New York ICE custody or transferred in from anywhere else in the country, at any time. As a result, they are particularly in need of reasonable phone rates and especially vulnerable to abusive interstate rates.

The State of New Jersey has a contract with Global Tel\*Link, an Alabama-based telephone provider, which allows New Jersey counties a menu of options to provide them with up to a 56% commission.<sup>2</sup> As a result, New Jersey counties have opted into phone rates that are up to twenty times higher than prevailing rates.<sup>3</sup> At the Monmouth County jail in Freehold, for instance, the County's 55% commission means that a fifteen-minute phone call to family in New York costs \$15.10.<sup>4</sup> The same call originating from a New York correctional facility would cost 75 cents.<sup>5</sup> Consider that you can earn four dollars a week working full-time as a Monmouth County immigration detainee. This means people held in Monmouth can work full-time for a month before they have enough money for a fifteen-minute call home.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, visit the Facebook page of New Jersey Advocates for Immigrant Detainees.

<sup>2</sup> These options can be viewed by visiting <https://wwwnet1.state.nj.us/treasury/dpp/ebid/Buyer/GetDocument.aspx?DocId=12912&DocName=T1934CountyPriceMatrix.pdf&DocLoc=15>.

<sup>3</sup> This comparison is based on phone rates obtained from the website of Verizon, the dominant telephone carrier in New Jersey.

<sup>4</sup> Monmouth County has chosen the second of the six options offered by GlobalTelLink in note 2, *supra*.

<sup>5</sup> The five cents per minute rate for people held in New York correctional facilities is confirmed at <http://money.cnn.com/2012/12/28/technology/prison-phone-calls/index.html>, among other places.

A few years ago, Global Tel\*Link estimated the cost of providing phone services to the Essex County Correctional Facility, which holds the most immigrant detainees of any jail or private detention center in New Jersey, at \$125,000.<sup>6</sup> Last year, Essex County and their phone provider were budgeted to take in \$1.7 million.<sup>7</sup> This represents more than a million and a half dollars taken from the most vulnerable in society, including immigrants who have been in the country for decades, with strong ties to the community and U.S. citizen family members.

The state also takes in between \$3.5 and \$6 million per year from state prisoners' phone calls, because of a 41% commission on calls. An inmate's ability to maintain connections with family and community can only help with readjustment on release. We need legislation, similar to A1436, introduced in the Assembly to bring fair phone rates to New Jersey's prison and jails. All commissions and surcharges should be abolished immediately, and the State should be required to contract with vendors that provide the lowest rates to inmates, instead of those that provide profits to counties and the state at the expense of those who can least afford it.

Thank you.

Karina Wilkinson  
Monmouth County Coalition for Immigrant Rights  
New Jersey Advocates for Immigrant Detainees

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<sup>6</sup> This number is calculated based on figures which appear in a prior contract for detainee phone services with Essex County, NJ.

<sup>7</sup> Essex County has chosen the fourth of the six options offered by GlobalTelLink in note 2, *supra*, with a 54% commission. It budgeted to receive \$925,000 in telephone commissions last year, per its adopted budget at <http://www.essex-countynj.org/budget2012.pdf> (page R27).