

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

April 30, 2014

Contact: Karina Wilkinson, New Jersey Advocates for Immigrant Detainees, (732) 491-3530

Scott Welfel, New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, (973) 624-9400 ext. 20

Steve Hockaday, Garden State Bar Association, (973) 500-8744

New Jersey Residents Seek Board of Public Utilities Regulation of Prison Phone Rates

Trenton – Today, a group of formerly incarcerated New Jersey residents, their families, and community organizations join together to file a petition with the state Board of Public Utilities (BPU), asking the Board to lower the cost of phone calls from prisons, jails, and other correctional facilities in New Jersey. The petition comes in the wake of a Federal Communication Commission (FCC) rule, implemented in February 2014, which caps the cost of out-of-state calls from correctional facilities but leaves in-state calls unregulated. The petition argues that “high phone rates lead to numerous negative effects for vulnerable families across the state,” and asks the BPU to ensure that phone companies cannot unfairly profit off people in New Jersey.

“My three children had to live without me while I was detained,” said Pauline Ndzie, who was held by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Hudson County Jail for five months. “I usually couldn’t afford to call them more than once a week. It isn’t fair to keep children from talking to their mother because of the high cost of phone calls.”

Ms. Ndzie is one of a group of family members of incarcerated people, former immigrant detainees, attorneys, and nonprofit organizations who are petitioning the BPU. Their petition highlights the impact of high phone rates on family relationships and access to legal services.

“The phone companies that operate in prisons and jails prey on New Jersey’s most vulnerable families, especially poor families and families of color,” said Cornell Brooks, President and CEO of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice. “Limiting the ability of incarcerated people to talk on the phone to their families only makes it more difficult for them to rejoin their communities and causes their innocent children to suffer.”

While the cost of a fifteen-minute phone call from state prisons in neighboring New York is less than a dollar, New Jersey families spend up to \$8.50 for a fifteen minute call to some county jails. These jails, which have the highest phone rates in the state, house people waiting for trial who cannot afford bail. Many also hold immigrant detainees, who do not have a right to counsel and rely on calls to family and friends who can help them prepare their case.

“The predatory prison phone rates in New Jersey have a devastating impact on immigrant detainees and their families. The New Jersey Board of Public Utilities must step in to prevent this exploitation, the burden of which falls disproportionately on African Americans and Latinos,” stated Rodrigo Diaz, Legal Fellow at LatinoJustice PRLDEF.

“It is not fair that people with families in New York are now paying less to talk to their loved ones than people with families here in New Jersey,” said Karina Wilkinson of the New Jersey Advocates for Immigrant Detainees. “BPU action is critical to ensure that all people in prisons and jails in New Jersey pay fair rates.”

The full petition will be available at 1 pm on April 30 at <http://www.njphonejustice.org/petition-filed-with-the-board-of-public-utilities>

###