

Legislation Introduced to Restore Face to Face Family Visits in New Jersey Jails
Advocates Applaud Legislators Call for Reduced Cost for those Incarcerated and their Families

For Immediate Release
December 8, 2016

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Trenton, NJ – Assemblyman Gordon Johnson (D-Bergen) introduced legislation this week to guarantee face to face family visits for individuals incarcerated in New Jersey. The bill, A4389, would cap costs at 11 cents per minute, ban commissions, require refunds for poor quality and ban fees on professional visits from lawyers and clergy. Similar legislation governing phone rates in prisons and jails was signed into law in August, 2016.

“We applaud Assemblyman Johnson for taking the lead on ensuring that people incarcerated in New Jersey and their families are not taken advantage of by an unregulated industry that is only interested in profits and counties that are looking to gain revenue off of those who can least afford it,” said Karina Wilkinson of the New Jersey Phone Justice Campaign (NJPhoneJustice.org). “We also welcome Congresswoman Duckworth’s efforts at the federal level to require the FCC to regulate video visitation.”

Also this week, Congresswoman Duckworth (IL-8) introduced a federal resolution, the *Video Visitation in Prisons Act of 2016*, that would require the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to regulate video visitation services, including capping rates, ensuring quality and banning the elimination of in-person visits.

“The vast majority of prisoners will eventually be released, and it’s only common-sense that—once they’ve repaid their debt to society—we should do whatever we can to ensure they do not return to a life of crime and instead have a chance to succeed,” said Congresswoman Duckworth. “Preserving contact with family members can enhance rehabilitation and improve the odds that former prisoners are able to become productive members of society upon their release, and my new legislation will help reform our criminal justice system to make that easier—not just for prisoners, but for their families as well.” (<http://duckworth.house.gov/index.php/media-center/press-releases/1005-new-duckworth-bill-aims-to-reduce-recidivism-rates-in-criminal-justice-system>)

Background

Research by the New Jersey Phone Justice campaign and the Prison Policy Initiative has shown that a growing number of facilities in New Jersey are contracting for video visitation services, and most of those are eliminating in-person family visits. Rates and commissions vary widely, as do quality and reliability. While companies are taking advantage of the lack of regulation and generating revenue from exorbitant rates, most New Jersey counties that provide video visits are taking commissions as well. Cumberland County rejected a bid from the company offering the lowest rates in order to gain an 85% commission.¹ Most troubling of all, the company iWebVisit, which originally contracted with Cape May and

¹ Woods, Don, “Cumberland County to Install New Video Visitation System,” *South Jersey Times*, Nov.

Salem to provide video visits, included in their contracts a requirement for the facilities to eliminate face-to-face family visits.² Passaic and Camden counties have also eliminated in-person family visits.

Below is a table providing information on the facilities we are aware of that provide off-site video visitation. The facilities also provide on-site video visitation for free, except Passaic which charges after two free 30-minute visits. An additional issue that the New Jersey bill would cover is Salem County’s practice of charging professionals, which include attorneys and clergy.³

Off-Site Video Visitation in New Jersey Correctional Facilities

Facilities	Cost	Per Minute Cost	Commission	Provider	Contract Date	Period
NJ DOC	none	none	none	NJ DOC	none	none
Camden County jail	\$8/20 min.	.40	Not available ⁴	Global Tel*Link	Not available	Not available
Cape May County jail ⁵	\$10/20 min.	.50	46%	Securus	1/26/2016	5 years
Cumberland County jail	\$9/20 min.	.45	85%	Southern Folger	11/2012	Monthly
Passaic County jail	2 free 30 min. visits/week, \$12/30 min. after ⁶	.40 after 2 free visits	55%	Renovo	4/3/2014	3 years ⁷

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² In a letter to the Federal Communications Commission, iWebVisit stated that it is no longer enforcing this requirement in its contracts. However, it is unclear whether iWebVisit informed Cape May and Salem of this change. For iWebVisit’s letter to the FCC, see:

<https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/60001390088/document/60001421001>

³ Professionals may request “confidential status.” All non-professional visits are monitored and recorded.

⁴ Camden County has not responded to our OPRA request for the contract with Global Tel*Link Inc.

⁵ Cape May revenues on iWebVisit contract initiated in the Spring of 2011, first installed February 2010 (p. 15) 2011: \$8,506.69 (3/4 of a year), 2012: \$13,655.17, 2013: \$11,497.70, 2014: \$15,687.00, 2015: \$13,997.80 (3/4 of a year).

⁶ Special consideration for extended visits can be requested, including for out-of-state and long-distance visitors.

⁷ The contract allows for two one-year renewals following the initial 3-year period. (p. 4)