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NY Families Victims Of Monopoly Contract & Backdoor Tax

BY ANNETTE DICKERSON

In New York State the families of prisoners are charged up to 630% more than average consumer rates to accept a collect call from their loved ones—the only way for them to maintain telephone contact. The New York State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) monopoly contract with MCI inflates the cost of these calls, adding a \$3.00 connection fee to the already jacked-up rate of 16c a minute. New York State receives 57.5% of the profits as a kickback, which amounts to more than \$20 million a year. Forty-two states across the country engage in this shameful practice, but New York has the highest kickback of all.

This cold and callous practice does more than punish prisoners by making it difficult for them to keep in touch. It also punishes their families and loved ones, grandmothers, single mothers and friends, many of whom are poor. They are the ones who are charged outrageous fees to fill the pockets of MCI and New York State. Not only is this practice unconstitutional, because of the population affected, it amounts to discrimination based on race and class. Not only that, it's a public safety issue: all the

studies show that maintaining contact with family and community is key to successful reentry for prisoners.

The New York Campaign for Telephone Justice is a multi-faceted effort, launched last fall by the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) in partnership with Prison Families Community Forum and Prison Families of New York, Inc. to expose and defeat MCI's telecommunications contract with New York State prisons. The campaign works with families across New York State on organizing, advocacy, public education and litigation.

In June, the campaign succeeded in passing a bill in the State Assembly (the Family Connections Bill, A.7231-A). The campaign is fighting to get the Senate version of the bill out of committee and passed, but Governor Patuki could end the monopoly contract all by himself with the simple stroke of a pen. If Albany doesn't act to end this injustice, the courts might do it for them. On August 30, 2005, attorneys with the Center for Constitutional Rights announced another major victory: The Federal court in the CCR suit *Byrd v. Goord* issued an opinion that questions the constitutionality of the MCI/DOCS phone contract for infringing on the rights of pris-

oners and their families to keep in touch. That suit and another in State court are moving ahead.

But this monopoly game is still not over! On Wednesday, November 16 2005, the New York Campaign for Telephone Justice (CCR) gathered at Bryant Park and marched to the governor's office in Mnhattan with the families and loved ones of prisoners, students and concerned citizens, and engaged in an unprecedented boycott of MCI for their shameful role in overcharging poor people for trying to stay in touch with their loved ones. Now families are planning to boycott MCI on the 16th of every month by refusing to accept calls from their loved ones and logging their participation at www.telephonejustice.org.

It's time to show the big companies like MCI that if our money is good enough for them to take, then our voices should be important enough to be heard. It's time to pressure the governor to end this shameful contract and stop balancing his budget on the backs of the poor. It's time to kick over the Monopoly board and end the game once and for all!

For more information on how you can get involved call 1 (212) 614-6421. ♦