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PRISONS

Finally, the right call

Spitzer stops phone companies & state from ripping off N.Y. inmates' families

New York has become a fairer and less cruel place, thanks to yesterday's announcement by Gov. Spitzer that the state will abandon the practice of charging collect-call rates — the highest in the nation — to families, friends and attorneys who want to communicate with prison inmates.

The change means that those wishing to talk with New York's 63,000 inmates will no longer have to pay \$3 per call and 16 cents a minute.

The cost will drop 50% when the new fiscal year starts in April, leaving tens of millions of dollars in the pockets of working people who did nothing wrong and should never have been hit with the punitive telephone calling rates in the first place.

It's a stark reversal of the immoral gouging imposed with such gusto by the administration of ex-Gov. George Pataki.

"The newly proposed rates will charge only the cost of the call, allowing families to maintain contact with their loved ones, without the undue financial burden of a state commission on the rate,"



Errol Louis

Gov. Spitzer ended an injustice. Photo by Ken Goldfield

said a terse, one-page press release from Spitzer's office.

In plain English, the statement amounts to an apology from the state for ever handing monopoly control over prison phones to MCI — which later merged with Verizon — to charge families more than 600% over regular collect rates. Under Pataki, families often got hit with monthly phone bills of \$300 or \$400 — and the state was a financial partner, taking a cut.

But an arrangement that drained an estimated \$175 million from low-income families over the last decade has finally come to an end.

In addition to Spitzer himself, congratulations go to the Center for Constitutional Rights, which filed a lawsuit challenging the system as an illegal tax — and then organized protests, lawsuits and boycotts to keep the fight going in the face of daunting odds.

"When I heard about the change

early this morning, I broke down and cried," says Annette Dickerson, who coordinated the anti-gouging campaign for the center.

Dickerson, with help from Malkin & Ross Strategic Services, a lobbying firm that frequently takes on public causes, took family members to street rallies, candlelight vigils, shareholder meetings of the phone company and trips to Albany to plead for change.

They rounded up sympathetic lawmakers, like Assemblyman Jefferson Aubry (D-Queens) and Sen. Michael Nozzolio (R,C-Fayette), and got prominent city pols onboard, notably Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum. A few newspaper columnists joined me in trying to keep the issue front and center.

It was all supposed to come to a head today, when the state's highest court, the Court of Appeals, was set to hear arguments on the legality of the prison phone charges. But Spitzer — perhaps reading the legal tea leaves — threw in the towel by cutting the rates.

Dickerson says her work isn't done. "I'm thinking about taking on the California system," she told me. "I'm going to Disneyland."

She will get there with the shining credentials of one who won justice for people who need it most.

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