

Factsheet: West County Detention Facility (WCDF)

High Cost of Phone Calls for Detainees



West County Detention Facility is a county jail that contracts space with the federal government to detain immigrants in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody. Recently, WCDF has come into scrutiny by faith, legal and community groups because of the exorbitant cost of phone calls for detainees and their families to contact loved ones and lawyers. **Global Tel*Link (GTL), the sole phone service provider for the facility, pays Contra Costa County 57% of the profits derived from high phone call rates.** *Where is this money going and why is the cost so high?*

Who is Detained at WCDF?

- WCDF imprisons up to 1,104 people within 5 housing units, 4 for males and one for females.
- Population includes detainees in ICE custody, county inmates, and those who have been “realigned” from the state prison system in effort to reduce overcrowding in CA state prisons.
- Last fiscal year (2011-2012), the Contra Costa County Sheriff’s Office was paid \$3,210,280 by the federal government to hold immigrants in ICE custody.

The High Cost of Phone Calls

In addition to profits made by imprisoning immigrants in ICE custody, WCDF profits from its contract with Global Tel*Link (GTL). GTL charges the families of inmates and immigrants detained by ICE exorbitant rates for phone calls. In exchange for access to this captive market, GTL pays Contra Costa County a commission payment or “kickback” of up to 57% of the high rates charged to families.

- Intrastate calls cost \$3.25 for the first minute, plus .25 for each additional minute.
- Interstate calls cost \$3.55 for the first minute, plus .55 for each additional minute.
- GTL paid Contra Costa County \$75,000 simply for signing the contract.
- Contra Costa County gets a commission payment of up to 57% on GTL calls.
- A 20-minute call costs the families of inmates \$14.00. With the 57% commission rate, Contra Costa County receives \$7.98 of that inflated price.
- For fiscal year 2011-12, Contra Costa County received a total of \$653,506 in commission payments from GTL.

High phone rates affect the ability to visit and maintain ties with family

The families of inmates and immigrants detained by ICE at WCDF are unable to maintain contact with loved ones due to exorbitant phone call rates. For immigrants in detention, the consequences of the inability to communicate with the outside world are dire. For example, immigrant parents who are detained may lose custody of their citizen children because they are unable to maintain contact with state agencies and family courts. In addition, the visitation policy at WCDF requires phone access in order to book a visit with family members. Because most people detained cannot afford the cost of phone calls, they are unable to visit with their loved ones or community networks of support and as a result, they remain completely isolated from the outside world.

High phone rates affect access to legal services for immigrants at WCDF

Most immigrants in detention are facing deportation proceedings or have filed an application for asylum, yet have no right to legal counsel at government's expense in such proceedings. They are left to their own recourse to obtain a lawyer.

- In fact, about 84% of all detained immigrants must represent themselves in court because they are not afforded the right to court-appointed attorneys and they cannot afford private defense lawyers.
- The majority of immigrants in detention have to defend themselves in court, and adequate telephone access is imperative to do so effectively. All of the legal defenses that exist in immigration court become illusory without telephone access.
- For example, an applicant for political asylum who fears torture or persecution in her home country must provide corroborating evidence to substantiate her claims. She must obtain letters from family members and witnesses, human rights reports, birth certificates and court records. **Telephone access is vital to this process and, if phone calls are cost prohibitive, the person seeking asylum risks being deported to a country where her life is in danger.**

WCDF is in violation of ICE standards on phone access.

The 2011 ICE Performance-Based National Detention Standards state that "detainees shall have reasonable and equitable access to reasonably priced telephone services." However, we believe ICE has failed to ensure that phone rates are reasonable at WCDF despite the fact that immigrants in detention have a critical need for telephone access and high phone rates leave them particularly vulnerable.

Who is affected by high phone rates at WCDF?

In addition to county inmates and immigrants detained by ICE, prisoners who are being "realigned" from CA state prisons because of overcrowding are also affected. In fact, in 2007 the CA state legislature banned the practice of commission payments (SB 81) between CA state prisons and telephone service providers. Since then, the phone call rates in CA state prisons have decreased dramatically. However, this protective legislation does not apply to county jails and private detention facilities. As a result, "realigned" prisoners who were formerly protected by SB 81 are again subject to exorbitant phone call rates in CA county jails, such as WCDF.

TAKE ACTION: Join the WCDF Immigrant Support Coalition in demanding transparency & accountability

- WCDF's contract with Global Tel*Link is due to expire in June 2013.
- The WCDF Immigrant Support Coalition demands transparency and information from Sheriff Livingston about the process for contract negotiations, compliance with ICE standards to contract with the lowest cost provider, and full disclosure about where the profit from WCDF's contract with Global Tel*Link is going.

*The information in this fact sheet was obtained through a recent Public Record Act request filed by Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC).

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