



# NEWS

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This is an unofficial announcement of Commission action. Release of the full text of a Commission order constitutes official action. See MCI v. FCC, 515 F 2d 385 (D.C. Circ 1974).

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**STATEMENT OF FCC COMMISSIONER MIGNON L. CLYBURN  
ON MEETING PETITIONERS MARTHA WRIGHT AND ULANDIS FORTE AND  
SCREENING THE AWARD-WINNING FILM *MIDDLE OF NOWHERE***

“This journey began in Washington, D.C. twenty years ago when Martha Wright’s grandson, Ulandis Forte, was convicted, sent to prison in Lorton, Virginia and was subsequently transferred to several out of state prisons, including Arizona, New Mexico, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Due to poor health and financial limitations, Mrs. Wright, who resides in D.C., could not easily visit her grandson. Written correspondence would also prove difficult because she is blind. Like many of us, this family relied on the telephone to stay connected. But they would soon be forced to terms with one of the stark realities of incarceration: prison payphone rates. Their story is shared by many families every day as approximately two million Americans are currently incarcerated.

The cost of calling from prisons is over and above the basic monthly phone service families of prisoners already pay, and in many cases families will spend significantly more for receiving calls from prison. Typically, a connection fee is charged for a prison payphone call, along with per minute fees. While prices vary by state and prison, the connection fee is usually \$3 to \$4 dollars, and the per-minute fee for interstate long distance service can be as high as \$.89 per minute. For example, one fifteen-minute interstate phone call from prisons in two different states—one in the East and one in the West—costs about \$17. For those families, they will spend an additional \$34 over and above their basic monthly phone rate to speak twice a month for a total of 30 minutes. Many cannot afford this. In fact, neither Mrs. Wright nor Mr. Forte had the financial means to talk on the phone for very long and they kept their conversations as short as possible—to five minutes or less. Over ten years ago, they joined with others to file a lawsuit, which led to petitioning this Commission to request lower payphone rates in prisons.

An award-winning film, *Middle of Nowhere*, beautifully portrays the compelling story of a young family separated by long distance due to incarceration. It captures the struggles families face when their loved ones are serving their sentences hundreds of miles from home. Staying connected is challenging. Traveling for in-person visits is time-consuming and often expensive, and such hardships are most acute for low-income families who struggle just to make ends meet. So access to low-cost phone service options should be part of the answer to this family divide. Connecting husbands to wives, parents to children, and grandparents to grandchildren should be a national priority because these tangible means of communicating not only will help these families keep in contact, but the general society benefits overall, as studies show that prisoners are less likely to reoffend if they are able to maintain these relationships with their loved ones.

I am uplifted that both political parties during their respective conventions this summer reiterated their commitments to policies that will reduce the recidivism rate in our nation, and I

am further energized in that this agency also has a role to play in doing just that. It is the Commission's responsibility to ensure that interstate phone rates are just and reasonable, and we have an obligation to ensure that basic, affordable phone service is available to all Americans, including low-income consumers. Incarcerated individuals and their loved ones should not be the exceptions here, and as watchdogs of the public interest, this Commission must and should act expeditiously. I am pleased that the Chairman has been receptive to the Wright Petitioners, and my discussions with him and his office have been very positive about the next steps needed to move forward in this proceeding. It is my hope that soon the Chairman will propose a rulemaking for a vote by the full Commission that will lead to lower interstate long distance rates for incarcerated individuals and their families. I look forward to working with my colleagues to ensure that we do the *right* thing by answering the Wright Petition.

The good news here is that the familial bond between Mrs. Wright and her grandson was not broken by exorbitant prison payphone rates. Mr. Forte has paid his debt to society, was recently released from prison, and they are now reunited. But what this family has not done is stop fighting for all of the others who remain desperate to hear the voices of their incarcerated loved ones on a regular basis. They know what it's like when you can't afford to make even a short call, let alone the more important ones containing the missing news that all families want to share—such as hearing your child's first words or describing their first academic highlight or great sports feat. And let us not minimize the power behind simply hearing and expressing those three words, 'I love you.' That is what Mrs. Wright and Mr. Forte are fighting for, and I am proud to stand with them."

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