

Public Phones and Payphones

The long distance and local rates charged from payphones and phones in other public areas like hotels, hospitals, and airports can vary, and may be surprisingly high. Before you use a public phone or payphone, know what to expect.

Be phone wise: know your rights

The FCC, along with states, protect consumers using public phones and payphones with rules that address:

- **Emergency calls:** Operator service providers must connect a 911 call immediately at no charge.
- **TRS:** Local calls to Telecommunications Relay Services – services that enable calls to or from persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech disabled – are free of charge at payphones.
- **Dialing around:** You can place calls from a payphone or other public phone through the long distance company of your choice by “dialing around” the service provider by using an access code. Dialing around may mean dialing an 800 number, a local number that begins with 950, or a seven digit access number known as a 101-XXXX or 10 10 XXX number. Federal law prohibits blocking these access numbers to long distance companies from public telephones.
- **Did not connect:** Operator service providers cannot knowingly bill for unanswered calls.
- **Local rates:** Numerous states continue to regulate the rates for local collect calls. Check with your state public utility commission or local phone company for rates in your area.
- **Service provider information:** Public telephone providers – such as hotels, hospitals and airports – must post on or near each telephone the name, address and toll-free number of the service provider in plain view.
- **Toll-free calls:** Calls to toll-free numbers, including calls billed to calling cards or credit cards, do not require a coin. You can reach an operator without depositing a coin.

When making a call

Listen after you dial the number you are calling to determine which service provider is handling your call. When you place a call from a public or pay phone, the provider usually handles the call if you dial “0” before dialing the telephone number. The service provider must identify itself to you at the beginning of the call before the call is connected and billed. You will then be told how to learn the total price of a telephone call – including any surcharges – by pressing no more than 2 digits, or by staying on the line.

Unless you use coins to pay for a call, the operator service provider will require you to charge the call to a calling card or credit card, call collect or bill the call to a third party.

Calling cards and your preferred long distance company

No matter what type of calling card you use, the only way to be sure that your call will be carried by your preferred long distance company is to follow your long distance company’s dialing instructions for placing calls from public telephones. Simply using your preferred long distance company’s calling card will not guarantee that your long distance company will carry the call. You can contact your preferred long distance provider and ask for instructions on how to place a call using your provider from a payphone.

Calls from correctional facilities

If you receive collect calls from inmates in prisons, jails or other correctional institutions, you can obtain the price of the call by simply pressing no more than 2 digits or by staying on the line. Operator service providers for inmate payphones in correctional facilities are required to tell the party receiving a collect call of his/her right to obtain rate quotations before the service provider connects and bills for the collect call. The party receiving the collect call can then decide whether or not to accept it or limit its length.

FCC rules apply only to interstate operator service provider calls. Most states, however, have similar requirements for intrastate operator service provider calls. For more information on Inmate Telephone Service, see our consumer guide at www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/inmate-telephone-service.

If you feel you or a family member has been overcharged by an inmate calling service provider, you can file a complaint with the FCC.

Filing a complaint

You have multiple options for filing a complaint with the FCC:

- File a complaint online at <https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov>
- By phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322); TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322); ASL: 1-844-432-2275
- By mail (please include your name, address, contact information and as much detail about your complaint as possible):

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

Consumer Help Center

For more information on consumer issues, visit the FCC's Consumer Help Center at www.fcc.gov/consumers.

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