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Operation Cellblock

A New System to Combat Use of Contraband Cell Phones in Prisons

Mississippi Department of Corrections
Parchman, Mississippi

Thank you Commissioner Epps. I appreciate the invitation to be here today to participate in this event. I commend your vision and commitment with respect to combating the use of contraband cell phones in prisons. In particular, your deployment of managed access technology to defeat contraband cell phone use is exactly the kind of leadership that will help increase awareness among federal, state and local leaders about effective approaches available to address this issue without associated unintended negative consequences.

For more than a year, the Federal Communications Commission, under the direction of FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski, has been working with state corrections departments, including Mississippi, our federal partner agencies, such as the National Institute of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and the National Telecommunications Information Administration, national organizations including the American Correctional Association and Association of State Correctional Administrators, as well as vendors and wireless carriers, to explore the most effective and precise technological options to defeat contraband cell phone use.

As part of this effort, we've been working to increase awareness and educate the public about the availability and advantages of technologies such as managed access and cell detection as means to effectively stop the use of contraband cell phones in prisons. We have consistently stressed the need to identify effective solutions via new and emerging avenues to stop and prevent the illegal use of cell phones in prisons, which often serve as the vehicle for sustained illegal activities by inmates. Our goal has been to identify technologies that are lawful and address the particular challenge at issue, without creating new ones.

Our experience to date has taught us that managed access technology is one that is not only lawful, but also specifically targets the problem at hand without jeopardizing other essential public safety, federal and state law enforcement activities, or the lawful use of cell phones by the public, including the ability to make 911 calls.

Because Mississippi is the first to deploy a managed access system, we at the FCC, and particularly our Wireless Telecommunications Bureau, spent long hours working with the vendor and wireless carriers to develop and implement the necessary regulatory steps for this novel application.

I am very pleased that with the carriers' actions to support this promising initiative. We were able to effectively work together to achieve this goal. And, we are cautiously optimistic that this technology, perhaps coupled with other applications and approaches, will prove effective in addressing this national problem.

I'd like to see what you've accomplished here in Mississippi extended to other state and federal prisons. I know that a few states have used the Request for Proposal issued by your state as a model for the development of their own pilot. Broad interest now exists among other the states, as well as correctional associations on non-jamming legal technologies, as demonstrated by proliferating RFP's.

We remain ready to assist any other correctional authority to explore and implement a managed access or other non-jamming technology.

In this regard, I'd like to mention that the FCC, in cooperation with the National Institute of Justice and Association of State Correctional Administrators, will be hosting a webinar this September 30, 2010, from 1-3 pm, at the FCC's Washington, DC headquarters. At this webinar, which everyone is invited to participate, we will continue to provide information about available technologies to combat the use of contraband cell phones in prisons.

In addition to the National Institute of Justice and the Association of State Correctional Administrators, we also will benefit from the active participation of the FCC's Office of Engineering and Technology, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and, perhaps, state and local officials.

Once again, thanks, congratulations, and we wish you great success in preventing the use of contraband cell phones in Mississippi's prisons and keeping your communities safe.