Advocates Applaud New Jersey Bill Capping Prison and Jail Phone Rates

And Call on Governor Christie to Sign It

For Immediate Release Contact: Karina Wilkinson, karinawilkinson@gmail.com

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Trenton, NJ - The New Jersey Advocates for Immigrant Detainees (NJAID) applaud the New Jersey Legislature for passing legislation to ensure fair and reasonable phone rates in jails and prisons, If signed into law, the legislation will cap interstate and intrastate rates at 11 cents per minute and international calls at 25 cents, and ban commissions, or kickbacks, on calls currently at 50% to 70% in some New Jersey jails. Commissions drive up costs for families with loved ones in jail or prison. The passage of the bill comes as welcome news to families in several New Jersey counties that continue to charge excessively high rates and accept commissions from out-of-state companies at the expense of New Jersey residents. NJAID calls on Governor Christie to sign the bill into law.

“Senator Turner, Assemblymen Johnson and Wimberly’s legislation provides much-needed relief to incarcerated individuals and immigrant detainees held in New Jersey counties that continue to maintain unreasonable rates and commissions,” said Karina Wilkinson, a member of NJAID. “We call on Governor Christie to sign the legislation in order to prevent counties from placing profits over the needs of New Jersey families and the community as a whole.”

The legislation, if signed, will make a major difference for the estimated 2.7 million children who rely on jail and prison phone systems to stay in touch with an incarcerated parent. “My three children had to live without me while I was detained,” said Pauline Ndzie, who was held by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Hudson County Jail for five months. “I usually couldn’t afford to call them more than once a week. It isn’t fair to keep children from talking to their mother because of the high cost of phone calls.”

While the state and counties tied to the state contract have already reduced rates to less than 4.5 cents per minute and ended commissions, there are at least four counties in New Jersey that continue to charge exorbitant rates. It currently costs ***more than minimum wage*** for a resident in Bergen County, Cape May, Salem, or Passaic for some calls to loved ones in jail. Under the legislation, a long distance 15-minute in-state call will go down from $7.50 to $1.65 in Bergen County, and all in-state calls will go down from $4.25 to $1.65 in Cape May, Salem, and Passaic Counties. Bergen County has the capacity to house some 196 immigration detainees in long term detention. The legislation also significantly decreases phone rates for international calling, which is particularly important for immigrant detainees who often rely on communication with family and others abroad to gather evidence for their immigration proceedings. The three New Jersey jails that house immigrant detainees (Bergen, Essex and Hudson jails) charge from nearly $18 to $45 for a 15 minute international call.

Last year, Bergen County considered a new phone contract for 21 cents per minute for domestic calls, well over the 11-cent cap passed by the legislature today, and sought to increase its commission from 60% to 65%. Greg Sullivan, a Bergen County resident, who has been visiting immigration detainees in New Jersey facilities since 2006, explained that in his visits, “the prohibitive cost of phone calls is a consistent complaint,” and that “since a large portion of the jail population is poor, this represents a severe and unjustified hardship.”

Allowing families of incarcerated individuals to remain in contact is not only the humane course of action, it also benefits the community at large. Permitting incarcerated individuals to communicate with their families and maintain ties to the community reduces recidivism and facilitates reintegration into society upon release from jail or prison.

New Jersey Advocates for Immigrant Detainees is a statewide coalition that advocates for immigrants in detention, educating the public, and organizing to eliminate detention. For information on NJAID and the NJ Phone Justice campaign, please visit www.njphonejustice.org.

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