

FCC Should Allow Jamming Technology in Prisons

By Jon Ozmint

Technology advances at an amazing pace, and criminals figure out how to employ it for illegal purposes at an equally amazing pace. Today, cell phones and related technology are the contraband of choice in America's prisons. From drug dealing to credit card fraud to escapes, cell phones in prisons threaten public safety. They allow inmates to avoid using inmate phone systems, where calls can be monitored and recorded. Recently, witnesses and others have been murdered as a result of "hits" issued by inmates using cell phones.

The Federal Communications Act of 1934 was created "for the purpose of promoting safety of life and property through the use of wire and radio communication." However, now wording from that act and the FCC's own rules prevent jamming technologies from being employed in our prisons. By withholding surgical jamming technology from state and local law enforcement, the Federal Communications Commission violates its own purpose and fails to acknowledge advancing technology.

Contraband can get past even the best detection systems. X-ray scanners, metal detectors, drug and bomb dogs, and the best of search techniques are all creations of human ingenuity, and they can all be defeated by human ingenuity. In South Carolina prisons, we have improved procedures to squeeze the traditional contraband pipelines. As a result, we are now experiencing an increase in what we call throw-overs — efforts to throw, shoot or drop packages containing contraband directly over our fences. This method requires

coordination with the throwers on the outside, via cell phones.

There are two ways to deal with the issue of cell phones in prisons. One is detection and location technology. This technology is expensive and imprecise. Further, it is only partially effective because it only works while phones are operating and it requires continuous staffing to monitor and search for phones, SIM cards and parts. The second method, blocking or jamming, is 80 percent cheaper and 100 percent more effective. It is continuous and it cannot be defeated by hiding and moving phones and their parts, eliminating the threats created by cell phones.

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Years ago, technology used to block and jam signals was imprecise; blocking cell phones within a limited area, such as a prison or a single building, would interfere with other calls outside of that radius. Thus, the FCC was justified in prohibiting such blocking. Now, improved technology can block specific signals, and within a set radius. Surgical jamming can be aimed. In fact, we invited the FCC to attend our recent demonstration of this technology in one

of our maximum-security prisons. Disappointingly, they did not send a representative.

From the beginning, the wireless industry has voiced two objections to using this technology in prisons. First, jamming interferes with calls outside of prison, such as 911 calls and second, it interferes with our own law enforcement radios. At our demonstration, the public and the media learned that these arguments are specious: Surgical jamming does not interfere with law enforcement radios or block 911 calls. In fact, it will not block any call or frequency outside of the prison perimeter.

Within prisons across our nation, inmates and their accomplices are using wireless technology to threaten public safety. Jamming cell phones can be an effective and necessary tool for law enforcement to combat this. Federal agencies are already allowed to purchase and use this jamming technology. If a cell-phone detonated bomb threatens the U.S. Capitol or the FCC building, federal law enforcement can jam the signal.

However, if a cell-phone detonated bomb threatens a local courthouse or school, Congress and the FCC have made it a crime for our state and local law enforcement to use the same technology that they afford to federal authorities. Congress and the FCC should act to address this issue.

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