

PUTTING AN END TO ILLEGAL CELL PHONE USE IN PRISONS

The FCC has made it a top priority to put an end to illegal cell phone use by inmates in prisons. Contraband cell phones have been used by inmates to arrange the murder of witnesses and public safety officers, traffic in drugs, and manage criminal enterprises. This illegal practice jeopardizes the safety of America's communities and public safety officials.

Cell phone jamming technology is illegal and causes more problems than it solves. Under current law, the use of technologies that block (or "jam") mobile calls are illegal in the United States. Cell phone jamming doesn't just block inmate calls -- it can also interfere with mobile 9-1-1 calls and public safety communication. That raises serious concerns for national public safety organizations like the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) and the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO).

The FCC has relentlessly pushed to identify new technology solutions to legally and effectively address this urgent problem. Working extensively with the state correctional officials, federal partners, wireless carriers, and technology vendors, the FCC has helped test and trial new technologies in a number of states with great success.

Inmate call capture is one technology with enormous potential to save lives and protect the public, while preserving public safety communications. It allows and passes through all 9-1-1 and authorized calls, and rejects unauthorized calls, including those placed by or made to inmates. At its first trial in the correctional facility in Parchman, Mississippi, this technology stopped 216,000 illegal calls made by and to inmates from ever reaching their destination in just one month.

Advantages of Inmate Call Capture

Legal: Inmate call capture systems are legal when properly authorized by the FCC.

Targeted: Inmate call capture does not jam signals but rather acts like a cellular base station that picks up calls made within the prison and passes along only authorized calls. If a cell phone number is on an approved list, the call will be instantaneously handed off to the cellular phone company and handled normally. If the call is not on this list, meaning it is illegally placed by or to an inmate; the call will not be completed and can receive an intercept message stating that the call is not authorized.

Effective: Because such systems are based on well-proven cellular base station technology, inmate call capture has little potential for causing interference to public safety radio communications. Inmate call capture technologies also offer investigative tools for corrections officials to pursue other enforcement action when properly authorized.

Secure: Inmate cell capture systems can be operated remotely and the controlling base station and antenna can be mounted on towers, mobile platforms, or other locations outside of the prison confines that are not accessible to inmates or prison staff.

Affordable: The State of Mississippi has implemented a system that does not create any cash outlays from the state budget, and other states are exploring this method.

Why Cell Phone Jamming is not the Solution

Illegal: The Communications Act prohibits non-Federal entities from using cell jammers. The FCC cannot waive this statutory prohibition absent a change in the law by Congress.

Interferes with public safety: Wireless 9-1-1 calls and public safety communications are put at risk by the use of jamming devices. National public safety organizations including the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) and the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) have expressed concerns with the potential for cell jammers to block 9-1-1 calls and disrupt critical public safety radio communications. It has not been demonstrated at this point whether jamming systems can be sufficiently designed and installed to prevent such interference outside of the prison walls. Jamming thus has the potential to negatively impact response efforts by first responders and other emergency responders during emergencies. In fact, our Enforcement Bureau has received reports from police and fire departments receiving interference from operation of illegal jamming devices. State communications officials have expressed concern about jammers bleeding interference outside the prison and disrupting police and firefighter frequencies which are close to cell phone frequencies.

Homeland security threat: The potential proliferation of cell jamming equipment, particularly if sanctioned, leads to great concerns for criminal or terrorist use absent significant controls. Cell jammers can be used to disrupt communications by the general public as well as state and local government for nefarious purposes, endangering public safety and homeland security.

Expensive: In addition to being illegal, jammers are not necessarily the low cost option, and may be more expensive than other technologies. They require extensive engineering design to accommodate the various distinct building features in order to provide effective coverage, and continued maintenance and monitoring, as well as distributed antenna engineering, cabling and secure housing to prevent tampering.