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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION ENDS PREDATORY PHONE RATES FOR DEAF PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS

August 9, 2013, Washington, D.C. – Eight months ago, Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of the Deaf (HEARD) launched its Deaf Prisoner Phone Justice Campaign. Through this Campaign, HEARD lobbied the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to bring an end to exorbitant prisoner telephone rates that disproportionately impact deaf and hard of hearing prisoners and their family members.

Today, the FCC adopted an order that, effective immediately, brings an end to these high rates. Significantly, the order prohibits companies from charging fees to deaf and hard of hearing prisoners who use relay services and from charging the same rates to communicate through this despairingly slow technology. Specifically, the order requires that phone companies base their rates on *actual* costs; provides a safe harbor rate of .12 per minute for prepaid calls and .14 minute for collect calls; and places an interim rate caps at .21 and .25 cents per minute for prepaid and collect calls, respectively.

During the Campaign, HEARD mobilized unprecedented participation from more than forty deaf and hard of hearing prisoners. These comments spoke to the isolating impact of inaccessible technology, sky-high rates, and additional fees being charged to prisoners using relay, that in most cases prevent them from communicating with anyone outside of prison. In addition, HEARD rallied members of the Deaf Community, family members of deaf prisoners and allies to submit comments about the unique impact of inaccessible telecommunications in prison for deaf prisoners and their family members and advocates. These comments illustrated how the absence of videophones and captioned telephones prevent deaf prisoners from connecting to their loved ones. They also illuminated issues related to systemic abuse of deaf prisoners that necessitates communication with advocates via sign language—a language that is unique from English.

Regrettably, this order does not address serious and sweeping accessibility concerns raised by HEARD related to the absence of videophone technology in all but one handful of prisons in this nation. We are pleased with today's historic vote that ends discriminatory practices that have disproportionately affected prisoners with disabilities for decades, but equality demands more. HEARD again calls on the leadership of Chairwoman Mignon L. Clyburn and the FCC to ensure that prison telecommunication is affordable *and* universally accessible. Notwithstanding today's vote, countless people with disabilities across this nation still cannot connect to their incarcerated loved ones.

HEARD's Deaf Prisoner Phone Justice Campaign will not end until deaf prisoners and their families have equal access to telecommunication in prison.

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For more information about the Deaf Prisoner Phone Justice Campaign:

[HEARD vlog: Lobbying the FCC for Change: Equal Communication Access for Deaf Prisoners!](#)
[HEARD's Public Comment to the FCC](#)
[HEARD's Deaf Prisoner Submissions](#)