



Spitzer ends charge on inmate collect calls

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In his first week as governor, and with the stroke of a pen, Eliot Spitzer ended a decade-long headache for criminal justice reformers -- the surcharge on collect calls from prisons that generated tens of millions of dollars for the state.

Advocates such as Stanley Richards, chief operating officer for The Fortune Society, a Manhattan-based nonprofit known for its work in helping prisoners re-enter society, hailed the decision and hoped that there was more change to come on matters ranging from Rockefeller drug laws to mental health care.

"Right now, there's a lot of excitement over the possibility that exists for us on the state level," Richards said. "First and foremost, I think people in the criminal justice system would just want to commend governor Spitzer."

Advocacy groups and residents who have family members in prison decried the extra fee on calls because it created a financial burden for them, but netted money for the state.

The arrangement was built into a contract designed and operated by MCI/Verizon for 10 years, with the state receiving a share of the proceeds from each call. A 19-minute collect call from a prison cost 536 percent more than one on a residential plan. The charge ended April 1.

Beyond the phone debate, two prominent organizations note that the time is ripe for overall reform as Spitzer continues his push for change in Albany.

A report by the Correctional Association of New York -- "[Addressing Key Criminal Justice Issues in the 21st Century](#)" -- found that in Spitzer and Lt. Gov. David Paterson, "we have a unique opportunity to make criminal justice practice in New York substantially more fair,

effective and humane."

The review by the Manhattan-based group seeks reform in education, the Rockefeller drug laws, juvenile justice, health care and mental health care.

Policy changes sought

A second review, "Blueprint for Criminal Justice Reform: Bringing Justice to Scale," comes from a coalition of nine organizations, including The Fortune Society, and expressed similar hope for policy changes.

The groups, which also suggest improvements on issues such as education and health care, said that under former Gov. George Pataki, most reform they describe as favorable to inmates was all but impossible to achieve.

"The reason we are hopeful is that in certain respects, there's nowhere to go but up in terms of criminal justice policy," said Robert Gangi, executive director of the Correctional Association of New York, a Manhattan-based watchdog group.

"There have been positive signs from Spitzer and Patterson, such as significantly reducing the telephone rates," Gangi added. "We saw that as a very positive step and as potentially symbolic of the approach that the Spitzer administration would take toward criminal justice issues."

Paul Larrabee, a Spitzer spokesman, said: "Governor Spitzer's criminal justice agenda focuses on preventing crimes before they occur, and implementing common-sense strategies that keep our families and communities safe."

He said his strategy is cooperative, drawing on local and state resources. "At the heart of this common-sense approach is working together with local police, prosecutors and first responders to make New York State safer and better prepared for the challenges it may face in the 21st century," Larrabee said.

Commitment to change

Another sign of Spitzer's commitment to change is his appointment of Brian Fischer as commissioner of the Department of Correctional

Services, Richards said.

Fischer, who runs the state's 70 prisons, draws praise from prisoner advocates because he supported programs that reduced recidivism when he was superintendent of Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining. His programs focused on education and re-entry.

But Spitzer also sparked some disapproval from the same groups last month when he signed into law a measure that provides "civil commitment" for sex offenders. The law, which allows the state to hold sex offenders deemed dangerous for an indefinite period beyond their release date, had long been on the wish list of the state's most conservative legislators and advocacy groups.

"I'm upset personally and professionally about the sex offender civil commitment law," said Barbara Allan, executive director of Prison Families Anonymous, a Deer Park-based organization that serves inmates' relatives. "I think that's a tremendous mistake because I do not think it will increase safety for the public."

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