

EDITORIAL

PSC's decision the right move for right reason

Foster Campbell, chairman of the Louisiana Public Service Commission, probably felt a little like a Don Quixote earlier this month as he fought a battle that many in the state, quite frankly, just didn't get. After all, reducing the amount inmates are assessed when making phone calls from prisons doesn't directly affect most of us.

But on Dec. 12, the PSC unanimously voted to do just that and drop rates 25 percent over the next two years.

It was the right move for the right reasons. And on Friday, that decision received added validation when the FCC announced it might also change its rules governing rates for inmate telephone calls that cross state lines. Again, excessive rates are the major complaint, not necessarily from inmates, but rather the friends and families who pay to remain in touch with their incarcerated loved ones.

"We now have validation of the unanimous vote of the Louisiana PSC to lower inmate calling charges by 25 percent and end the illegal practice of adding fees and charges to the phone bills of inmate families," Campbell said in a news release. "Louisiana has corrected an unjust, unreasonable and unfair situation, and now the federal government is looking at the cost of calls that cross state lines."

Currently, charges for inmate calls in Louisiana can be as much as 15 times higher than what one would pay in the "regular" world.

Actions like those of the PSC earlier this month to reduce the high cost of inmate telephone calls wasn't necessarily about doing a favor for those who find themselves incarcerated in Louisiana; it was an action to do the right thing, plain and simple.

No one expects to give convicted criminals special treatment. Just fair treatment. We literally have a captive audience usually charged unnecessary and often unfair fees and charges on top of an excessive by-minute bill most of us in the general public would not accept in today's competitive telecommunications market.

Campbell said the average cost for inmate calls in Louisiana is about \$3 for a 10-minute call. For the same length of calls in Texas, the cost is \$2.68; in Florida, \$1.21; and in New York state, 48 cents.

During testimony given at a November PSC hearing on the issue, ministers and family members spoke about the hardships born from this situation.

Saying prisons and phone service providers should "make a living, not a killing," the Rev. Dan Krutz, an Episcopal priest who serves as director of the Interfaith Council pointed out: "I cannot believe Jesus would come away and say, 'We need to take care of our bottom line.'"

The PSC's rate reduction only applies to collect calls placed to family, legal counsel, clergy or certain government agencies such as schools.

In the end, this isn't about prisoners at all. Indeed, this is simply about ensuring that a public entity contracts with a company offering a common service at a fair price. There's nothing fair about excessive pricing — just because we can — when it's not justified by the services being provided. Traditionally, when a public entity seeks a contract, it tries to get the better deal or the best price. That's not happening in the current situation. Change was warranted.

We've no doubt the PSC did the right thing here. The PSC performed the job it was created to do.