South Carolina Department of Corrections

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For immediate release
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LITTLE ROCK, Ark. – The Federal Communications Commission announced today that it will change the law and allow states to jam illegal cellphone signals from inside prisons and jails.

FCC Chairman Brendan Carr said Wednesday the commission will vote in three weeks to clarify the rules, and a draft decision will be released to the public before the vote.

“I think the general public has not been aware of the scope and scale of the contraband problem,” Carr said. “It is a tool that has been denied law enforcement and corrections officials for too long.”

Carr made the announcement in Little Rock, Ark., along with SCDC Director Joel Anderson, Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin, Sen. Tom Cotton, Arkansas Corrections Secretary Lindsay Wallace and other law enforcement leaders.

“This change will make all of America safer,” Anderson said. “The criminals can now stay behind bars again, instead of being able to commit crimes with illegal cellphones.”

South Carolina and Arkansas have led the decade-long effort to change the FCC rules to allow jamming.

Tests to jam cell phone signals have been conducted at Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia twice – in 2019 and again earlier this summer. Both tests proved the technology works without interfering with cell phone signals on the outside.

Carr said data from the tests show that targeted applications focusing on living quarters and other areas show this will be 100 percent effective.

“Now we’re removing an obstacle that the federal government had in place to state and local officials deploying this technology,” Carr said. “We’re going to work closely with them to authorize jamming of state and local prisons. We expect this is going to make significant progress on this issue.”

Contraband cell phones have proven to be the most dangerous weapon in prisons today. Inmates have been prosecuted for using cell phones to order murders, incite violence, orchestrate escapes, demand money from innocent victims and run sophisticated criminal enterprises from inside prison walls.

“They’re being used by some of the worst criminals to continue to carry out egregious conduct,” Carr said. “They’re ordering hits, orchestrating kidnappings, running drug operations. And unfortunately, increasingly they’re being used as part of child sexual exploitation.”

In making the announcement, Carr talked about the experience of former SCDC Capt. Robert Johnson, who was shot in 2010 in his Sumter home six times by a man hired by inmates using an illegal cellphone. Johnson, a contraband captain at Lee Correctional Institution in Bishopville, survived the shooting but endures constant pain and ongoing surgeries to deal with the aftermath of the shooting.

Carr said Johnson’s experience has helped drive the change, calling him a tremendous advocate for making change when it comes to contraband cellphones.

After the vote, states will apply to the FCC to use the jamming technology. Once approved, the agency will work with states and providers to ensure the measure is used correctly.

“I want to thank Chairman Carr, Sen. Cotton, Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin, U.S. Attorney Bryan Stirling, SC Attorney General Alan Wilson, Secretary Wallace and so many other partners for their dedicated, hard work in this serious public safety issue,” Anderson said. “South Carolina will be ready to start the process as soon as the vote takes place.”

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