Contraband Cell Phones in Prisons

The illegal use of cell phones by inmates is a serious problem because there are no legitimate customers in prison. Both the wireless industry and the corrections community share the same goal of stopping the use of cell phones by prisoners. CTIA-The Wireless Association® and our members believe the best way of accomplishing this goal is by attacking the underlying supply of, and demand for, contraband cell phones in prisons through lawful and currently available solutions, such as cell detection and managed access technologies.

CTIA and our members supported the Cell Phone Contraband Act (S. 1749), which would increase penalties for those providing devices to prisoners, as well as for the prisoners using the devices. In August 2010, this bill became law.

Unfortunately, some believe the solution to this problem is using illegal and less effective signal jamming technologies. Jammers can cause serious interference problems for legitimate users, and with limited exceptions for certain federal agencies, signal jamming equipment is illegal due to Section 333 of the Communications Act because of those problems. Specifically, jamming equipment can cause harmful interference for first responders, wireless carriers and mobile customers. Leading public safety organizations have expressed concern about deploying jammers at correctional facilities due to the likelihood of impairing first responders’ and consumers’ use of their wireless devices in emergency situations.

With support from carriers across the country, demonstrations of alternative technologies, such as managed access and cell detection, are continuously proving that they can prevent inmates from using contraband phones while ensuring public safety and consumers have service to their devices. In September 2010, the Mississippi Department of Corrections deployed a managed access system with tremendous success. The South Carolina Department of Corrections announced in October 2010 that it is testing a similar kind of technology.

The use of jamming equipment can cause harmful interference for public safety first responders and wireless carriers and customers.

- Signal interfering devices such as jammers should remain illegal. As we have seen in real-life examples in the U.S. and around the world, interference caused by jamming can have a detrimental effect on lawful customers. In May 2010 in downtown Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a single illegal jamming device in a residential apartment caused major disruptions for the Coast Guard, the FCC, the National Communications System and commercial wireless providers. In Brazil, a prison’s jamming device knocked out wireless service to 200,000 nearby residents. In India, people living within a five kilometer radius of a prison’s jammer experienced disrupted wireless service.

Lawful technologies such as cell phone detection and managed access have proven to work and are superior solutions to signal jamming.

- Cell phone detection technologies work like a scalpel to identify the location of a contraband cell phone, track its use, retrieve the device and prosecute those in possession. It also allows officials to identify how – and by whom – these contraband devices are being smuggled into facilities. Most importantly, detection devices and managed access solutions don’t block legal wireless subscribers or public safety officials from using their devices.

For more information, please visit: http://www.ctia.org/advocacy/policy_topics