

Collect Calls to Landlines

Hey Bell: Let's talk about ... hypocrisy | Jordana Goldlist

By **Jordana Goldlist**



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(January 29, 2020, 10:29 AM EST) -- Wednesday Jan. 29 is Bell "Let's Talk" Day, the day on which Bell Canada contributes five cents for every applicable text, call, tweet, social media video view and use of its Snapchat filter or Facebook frame towards mental health initiatives in Canada.

According to its website, Bell has committed \$100,695,763.75 to mental health initiatives since its campaign launched in 2011. Bell Let's Talk has partnered with more than 1,000 organizations that have supported over 3.4 million people with access to mental health services. This campaign has helped millions of Canadians connect with the help they need while simultaneously helping to end the stigma of mental illness. Except for anyone and everyone in jail.

While the Let's Talk campaign has worked to deliver services to people and communities who desperately need it, Bell Canada has been waging a predatory pricing war against inmates in provincial and federal jails across the country, often preventing them from talking to loved ones when they need it the most, often at a significant detriment to their mental health.

If you are asking yourself why you should care about inmate phone access, then you or anyone you love has never been incarcerated.

Perhaps you don't care about the conditions of those in jail because you think they deserve to be there and their treatment is of no consequence to you. I encounter many people who feel this way and I usually explain why they should care in very simple terms: most inmates will one day be released back into society.

If we cage people like animals, we cannot be surprised when they behave like caged animals, even when they are free. By stripping the most vulnerable members of society of their most basic rights and needs, we are destroying any chance they might have for rehabilitation.

If we want to live in a better society, we need to help people be better and feel better. Surely Bell recognizes this; it must be the basis upon which the "Let's Talk" campaign was created and continues today. What Bell seems to be missing is that this concept includes, perhaps most especially, people who are in jail.

While Bell has been spreading awareness and garnering support for mental health initiatives for law-abiding Canadians, it has directly contributed to mental illness among inmates who are unable to access their family, friends and community support systems. Bell claims to donate five cents for every variety of applicable communications sent across the country, one day each year.

At the same time, Bell collects \$1 for every 20-minute local phone call made from jail and \$25 for every 20-minute long distance call made from jail. In Ontario alone, there are almost 240,000 local calls made per month and 50,000 long-distance calls made per month, according to the Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project. That means, in Ontario alone, Bell Canada is collecting approximately \$1.49 million from inmate phone calls every month.

In case you were wondering, that's 20 #BellLet'sTalk tweets for a one-minute call, 100 tweets for a five-minute call, and 1,200 tweets for an hour-long call. That hour-long call, however, would require the inmate to call the person back five times because Bell automatically ends jail calls after 20 minutes.

That adds an extra \$12.50 to the receiver's phone bill because Bell charges the receiver \$2.50 to accept each collect call and every call must be made to a landline, which further increases Bell's profit margins. People with loved ones in custody can easily and often face phone bills in the astronomical amount of \$500-\$700 per month.

Most people cannot afford the additional expense and the result is that the inmate is deprived access to those who support them.

This includes not only family and friends, but social workers, psychologists, addiction counsellors and health care providers who are all a part of the network needed to support a person's release back into the community.

According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), mental illness rates are about four to seven times more common in prison than in the community. No doubt that Bell Canada contributes to this statistic by preventing inmates from having affordable access to phone calls with those who could provide them with the help they need the most.

In 2018, the Office of the Chief Coroner in Ottawa conducted an inquest into the death of Cleve Geddes, who committed suicide while in custody at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre. One of the many recommendations made by the inquest was that the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services "should ensure that the phone system in correctional institutions is changed to make it easier for inmates to make outgoing phone calls. Specifically, the phones available to inmates should be able to call cell phones and should not make only collect calls."

While the recommendation was directed at the Ministry, the inquest was talking to you, Bell Canada, because you and you alone have a monopoly on the business of prison phone calls.

So, let's talk about the fact that Bell Canada maintains the contract with the Ministry for jail communications both federally and provincially and charges astronomical prices for each and every call. Let's talk about Bell Canada's failure to provide inmates with affordable telephone access to their family, their friends and their support network in the community.

Let's talk about the hypocrisy of a campaign from a corporation that supports mental health for some Canadians while simultaneously preventing others from accessing the mental health support they so desperately need. The Bell Canada prison phone contract is up for renewal this year.

Let's talk to Bell Canada about making mental health accessible for all Canadians, including those who suffer from inside a jail cell.

Jordana Goldlist is the principal of JHG Criminal Law, a boutique firm in downtown Toronto focused on defending people charged with murder, firearms offences and crimes related to the commercial drug trade. From teenage street kid to TEDx speaker, Jordana aims to disrupt the status quo and help marginalized youth and young adults realize their own potential. You can reach her at jgoldlist@jhgcriminallaw.com.

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