

Remarks of Senator Tammy Duckworth
Recipient of the United Church of Christ Media Justice Ministry Parker Award
October 24, 2023

Hello, everyone!

First off, I want to thank you for this recognition. It means the world.

We're all here today because we believe in a simple truth: that our fight for inclusivity has to, well, be *inclusive* of every sector of our modern world, from voting reform to education reform, from environmental justice to—crucially—telecommunications justice.

Dr. Everett Parker's life was a testament to that truth. He channeled both his passion and his compassion into action. He used both his brilliance and his resilience to lift up others. He recognized that unless we as a society addressed the prejudice that was running rampant in our media, the civil rights that he and so many others were fighting for would remain forever out of reach.

He believed in each person's right to be heard—including their right to be heard by the FCC... Arguing that the public—not just deep-pocketed corporations—had the right to mold and form and shape America's broadcasting, so it, like our nation, would be truly for the people and by the people as well.

And along the way, he changed how so many view telecommunications, instilling a moral imperative into the FCC's work. Those are just a few of the reasons why receiving this award means so much to me.

Because every day as a U.S. Senator, I have tried to live by a similar mission: to ensure that the people's representatives actually *represent* the people. And that includes working to guarantee that every American has access to the telecommunications they need to keep them healthy, heard and whole.

When reflecting on what I wanted to say this morning, I kept coming back to one specific passage of Scripture:

"Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." Hebrews 13:1-3.

This is the moral crux at the heart of a bill that I was proud to write, push forward and watch President Biden sign into law earlier this year: the *Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act*.

Named after the incredible, late Martha Wright-Reed, who established a legacy that will live on in every preserved connection between a child and an incarcerated parent, between spouses and partners.....and especially, between the dedicated grandparents and the grandchild they deeply love and refuse to give up on.

Martha Wright-Reed's example represents American at it's a best: a citizen refusing to be silent in the face of injustice and ultimately using her voice and her actions to galvanize the forces of change to right a long-standing wrong.

You can also see Dr. Parker's legacy in every word... every line... of this new law, which takes the ethical imperative of Dr. Parker's work and applies it to our incarceration system, empowering the FCC to *finally* end a predatory phone call rate scheme that all too often prevents incarcerated people from staying in touch with their families.

For years, one phone call from a correctional facility could cost about as much as a monthly phone plan, preventing too many children from being able to hear the comfort of their parents' voices, keeping too many spouses from being able to say a simple "I'm here for you" to their partners, even from a few hundred miles away.

And let's be clear: when unjust and unreasonable communications rates cut off an incarcerated person from vital connections... the harm extends far beyond a single family. After all, the vast majority of incarcerated people will eventually be released... and we all have a stake in making sure our nation better prepares our fellow Americans to navigate the daunting challenge of reentry. That is why it was so important to enshrine in Federal law a clear and enforceable requirement that all prison communications rates, whether interstate or intrastate, must be just and reasonable.

Ending a predatory status quo that enabled prison telecom providers to shamelessly gouge the families of incarcerated people was not only a moral imperative... particularly for the more than 2 million children who have at least one parent incarcerated... but the evidence tells us it will also help reduce recidivism rates ... and preventing repeat offenses benefits us all.

Of course, restoring the FCC's authority to ensure prison communications rates are just and reasonable was only the first step, and I know under Chair Rosenworcel's leadership, the FCC is working around the clock to effectively implement our new law.

And I know everyone is eager to hear from Chair Rosenworcel, so I'll wrap this up with just one more thought: To me, it's clear that defending telecom justice is interwoven with the fight to protect so many of the other rights that we hold dear. After all, being able to communicate when incarcerated allows you better access to the healthcare information you need... to the legal representation you depend on. It allows each of us, even outside of a prison's walls, to be able to reach the necessary, vital information on TV...on the internet... wherever... about our politics... about our world... about our next fight for equality and justice for all.

Because it comes down to this: It's much harder to live your life fully if you cannot use your voice freely.

That is one of the many lessons that Dr. Parker taught us, and it is a principle that I will keep striving to live by every moment that I'm fortunate enough to call myself a United States Senator.

Now, let me close with how I began: by simply saying thank you.

Thank you for this honor. But much more importantly, thank you... each of you... for working so tirelessly to ensure that everyone's voice can be heard. No matter their zip code... no matter their incarceration status... no matter what.