

O'Malley seeks OK to jam cell phone calls in prisons
Federal law currently forbids it

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Gov. Martin O'Malley is launching a federal lobbying effort to allow the jamming of cell phone calls by prison inmates, and he wants permission to test the technology to see if it works.

The governor's request, made public on Sunday, is part of an effort to crack down on witness intimidation, prison gangs and retaliation.

It comes several weeks after federal authorities indicted four corrections officers and members of the Black Guerrilla Family prison gang accused of conducting business on conference calls with prisoners across the state using smuggled cell phones. Also in recent weeks, a federal jury sentenced a Baltimore Bloods member, who used a cell phone inside the city jail to order a hit on a witness, to four life terms.

Currently, states and counties can't jam cell phone signals under the Communications Act of 1934, which regulates the use of radio frequencies. The Federal Communications Commission, however, may permit federal agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Agency, to use the technology.

Smith expected to challenge Franchot O'Malley is planning to ask federal regulators for permission to conduct a brief test of jamming technology, to determine its effectiveness and whether it would disrupt civilian cell phones nearby.

"We all determined a couple of years ago that gangs were our biggest problem and that cell phones were their means of communication from prison to the streets," said Gary Maynard, secretary of the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Corrections. "We tried to get [state] legislation last year and the year before to increase the penalty for having cell phones in prison from a misdemeanor to a felony, but the bills failed in the House Judiciary Committee."

Maynard said the state will send a formal request to the FCC in the next two months.

To date, the department's efforts have centered on training dogs and deploying metal-detector-like scanners to find contraband phones, according Patrick Moran, state director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the union representing corrections officers. Last year, corrections officials found 947 smuggled cell phones in state prisons.

In a letter delivered last week to U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, a Maryland Democrat, O'Malley said that more needed to be done.

The FCC has denied two recent requests from Louisiana and the District of Columbia to test the jamming technology, according to the Associated Press.

The test in Maryland would take less than an hour, Maynard said.

In that time period, "we should be able to start the jamming device, focus it on particular area, test the ability to call within that zone and the ability to make phone calls adjacent to that zone," he said. "The technology is moving pretty fast in this area, and there's pretty good precision-blocking."