

Panel approves prison phone jamming bill

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States could seek permission to conduct wireless cell phone jamming in prisons to stop inmates from organizing crimes from behind bars under a measure approved yesterday by a U.S. Senate committee.

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The Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee approved the bill in Washington, sending it to the full Senate for consideration. The bipartisan legislation would allow states to petition the Federal Communications Commission for permission to use wireless cell phone jamming technology.

The bill is being sponsored by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas. Maryland Sen. Barbara Mikulski is a Democratic co-sponsor.

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley praised the bill's progress. O'Malley, a Democrat, asked the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to participate in a 30-minute demonstration at a Maryland prison that houses federal inmates. The agency shares responsibility for managing the nation's communications network with the Federal Communications Commission.

"This legislation would provide us the tools to use technology to block illegal inmate cell phone calls from within the walls of our prisons," O'Malley said in a statement.

The issue has been prominent in Maryland, where a Baltimore drug dealer used a cell phone to plan the killing of a witness from the city jail two years ago. In May, Patrick A. Byers Jr. was convicted of murdering Carl S. Lackl Jr., who had identified Byers as the gunman in a previous killing.

Law enforcement officials in other states also have called for a change in the current law, which doesn't allow states to interfere with cell phone transmissions.

Last month, South Carolina's prison chief announced that corrections directors in 26 states signed on to a petition he sent to the FCC asking federal regulators' permission to jam cell phone signals inside state penitentiaries.

The legislation approved by the Senate Committee would require the commission to consider all available technologies that could be used to block unauthorized wireless communications in correctional facilities.

The bill would require the FCC to create rules and criteria to approve jamming systems and devices before accepting petitions for a waiver of the prohibition on technology that interferes with wireless communication.

The FCC also would have to hold field tests to ensure the lowest possible power output necessary to limit interference on communication outside prisons.

Critics say cell phone jamming could interfere with emergency response and legitimate cell phone use near prisons.

The legislation also requires that technology to stop prison cell phone use can only be used by correctional facilities.