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ACLU Launches Nationwide Action Against NSA Snooping on Americans' Phone Calls

by R. Ben Stone, Executive Director
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ACLU of Iowa is One of 20 State Affiliates Urging Local Officials to Investigate Phone Companies' Cooperation with Spy Agency; FCC Action Also Sought

NEW YORK -- Responding to reports that phone companies are turning over private details about Americans' telephone calls to the National Security Agency, the American Civil Liberties Union today launched a nationwide initiative to end illegal government spying.

The ACLU of Iowa and affiliates in 19 other states today filed complaints with Public Utility Commissions or sent letters to state Attorneys General and other officials demanding investigations into whether local telecommunications companies allowed the NSA to spy on their customers.

"It's time for this illegal invasion of privacy, that could affect everyone in this country, to be unveiled," said Ben Stone, Executive Director of the ACLU of Iowa. "We do not seek to obstruct legitimate law enforcement activities, but we are determined to stand up for the fundamental privacy and due process rights of people whose telephone records have been divulged without a warrant, notice or consent," he added.

The ACLU today also sent a letter to the Federal Communications Commission urging the agency to reconsider its refusal to investigate reports that at least three major telecommunications companies -- AT&T, BellSouth and Verizon -- cooperated with the NSA in an effort to collect calling information and call patterns on every American.

In its letter, the ACLU refuted the agency's assertion -- made public late yesterday -- that the classified nature of NSA activities render it "unable" to investigate potential wrongdoing. The ACLU noted that the government is publicly defending the program, so there is no way that all the details about it are "state secrets" or involve classified information. The letter also pointed out that the government has a recent history of overclassifying information and conveniently claiming that any evidence of embarrassing or illegal actions are "state secrets."

In Des Moines, Stone of the ACLU-IA announced that a complaint had been filed with the Iowa Utilities Board by Frank Burnette, a local businessman and attorney who has been a customer of AT & T for 45 years. While Qwest, the local phone company for Iowans, has reportedly refused to turn over records to the NSA, Stone said that anyone in Iowa who uses another carrier like Verizon or AT&T for their long distance service should consider filing a complaint with the IUB.

In addition to the ACLU of Iowa, actions were filed today by ACLU affiliates in **Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia and Washington.** Other ACLU affiliates are expected to file additional letters and complaints in the coming weeks.

“We cannot sit by while the government and the phone companies collude in this massive, illegal and fundamentally un-American invasion of our privacy,” said ACLU Executive Director Anthony D. Romero. “And unfortunately, we cannot wait for Congress to act. The ACLU is mobilizing its members and supporters nationwide to demand investigations into this shocking breach of trust. And we are asking the FCC to use its authority to uncover the facts about how far the president’s illegal spying has gone. The American people want answers.”

As part of its nationwide campaign, the ACLU today is running full-page advertisements in *The New York Times* and half a dozen major daily newspapers, with the headline: **“If You’ve Used a Telephone in the Last Five Years, Read This.”** The advertisement provides a link to www.aclu.org/dontspy, where individuals can add their names to the public record in the ACLU’s complaints with Public Utility Commissions and send e-mails to the FCC urging that it investigate the matter. “We are seeking to create the perfect storm to end illegal NSA spying,” said Barry Steinhardt, director of the ACLU’s Technology and Liberty Program.

When the NSA spying program was initially uncovered last December, the ACLU was one of the first organizations to bring a legal challenge, acting on behalf of a prominent and politically diverse group of journalists, scholars and lawyers. That challenge will be heard before Judge Anna Diggs Taylor in Detroit on Monday, June 12; it will be the first ever hearing on the legality of NSA spying since the program was disclosed.

More information on the case is online at www.aclu.org/nsaspying

The ACLU’s FCC letter, the affiliate letters, today’s full-page advertisement and other background is online at www.aclu.org/dontspy

