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Cree et al.

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(54) **INMATE MESSAGING SYSTEM AND METHOD**

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(52) **U.S. Cl.** **379/88.25**; 376/67.1; 376/88.17; 376/88.18; 376/88.19; 376/265.01; 376/265.13

(58) **Field of Search** 379/112.04, 88.04, 379/67.1, 70, 76, 88.12, 88.17, 88.18, 88.19, 88.22, 88.25, 265.01, 265.03, 265.13

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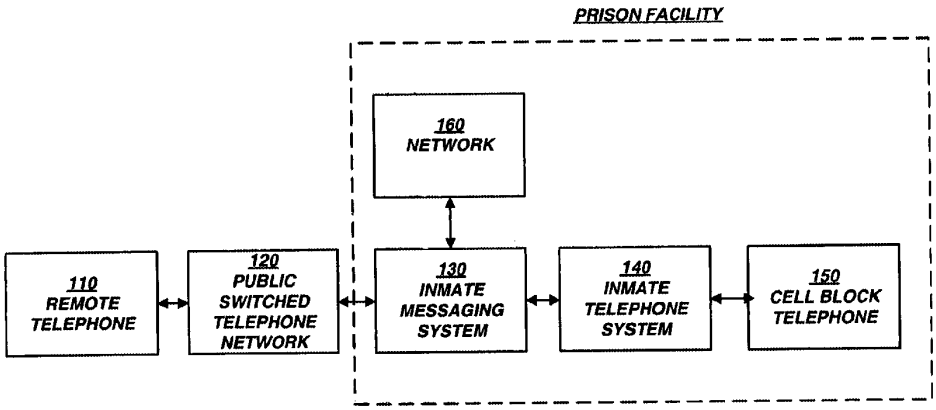
(57) **ABSTRACT**

An inmate messaging system and method for notifying an inmate in a prison facility of messages received from a caller outside the prison facility. The caller dials into the inmate messaging system using, for example, a conventional "touch tone" telephone. The caller is prompted by the system for identifying information, which is verified against known information in a database. Identifying information can include a PIN for verifying the caller's account. During a set-up session, the system prompts the caller to record her name. The name recording is used to verify the account when the caller leaves a message for the inmate, and is also used to identify the account when the inmate retrieves the message from within the prison. The caller can specify a time with the message for returning the telephone call, or have the call placed immediately. The inmate accesses the inmate messaging system via a prison telephone. If messages are pending for inmates residing in the vicinity of the phone, the inmate is provided with an option to retrieve a list of such pending messages. To hear specific messages, the inmate enters identifying information, such as a PIN. If the PIN is successfully verified, the system informs the inmate that a return call can be made to the caller anytime, or at a time specified by the caller.

22 Claims, 13 Drawing Sheets



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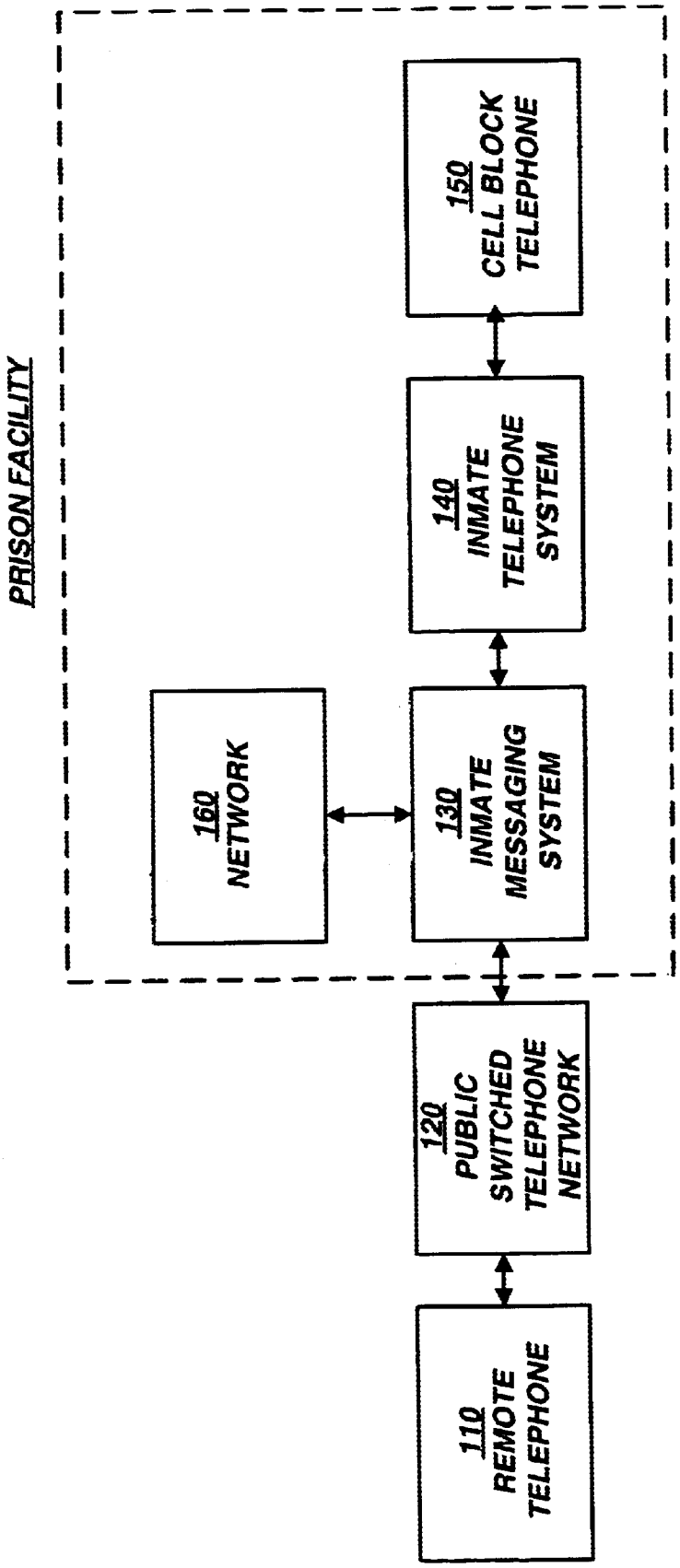
PRISON FACILITY
110 REMOTE TELEPHONE
120 PUBLIC SWITCHED TELEPHONE NETWORK
160 NETWORK
130 INMATE MESSAGING SYSTEM
140 INMATE TELEPHONE SYSTEM
150 CELL BLOCK TELEPHONE

100

FIG. 1

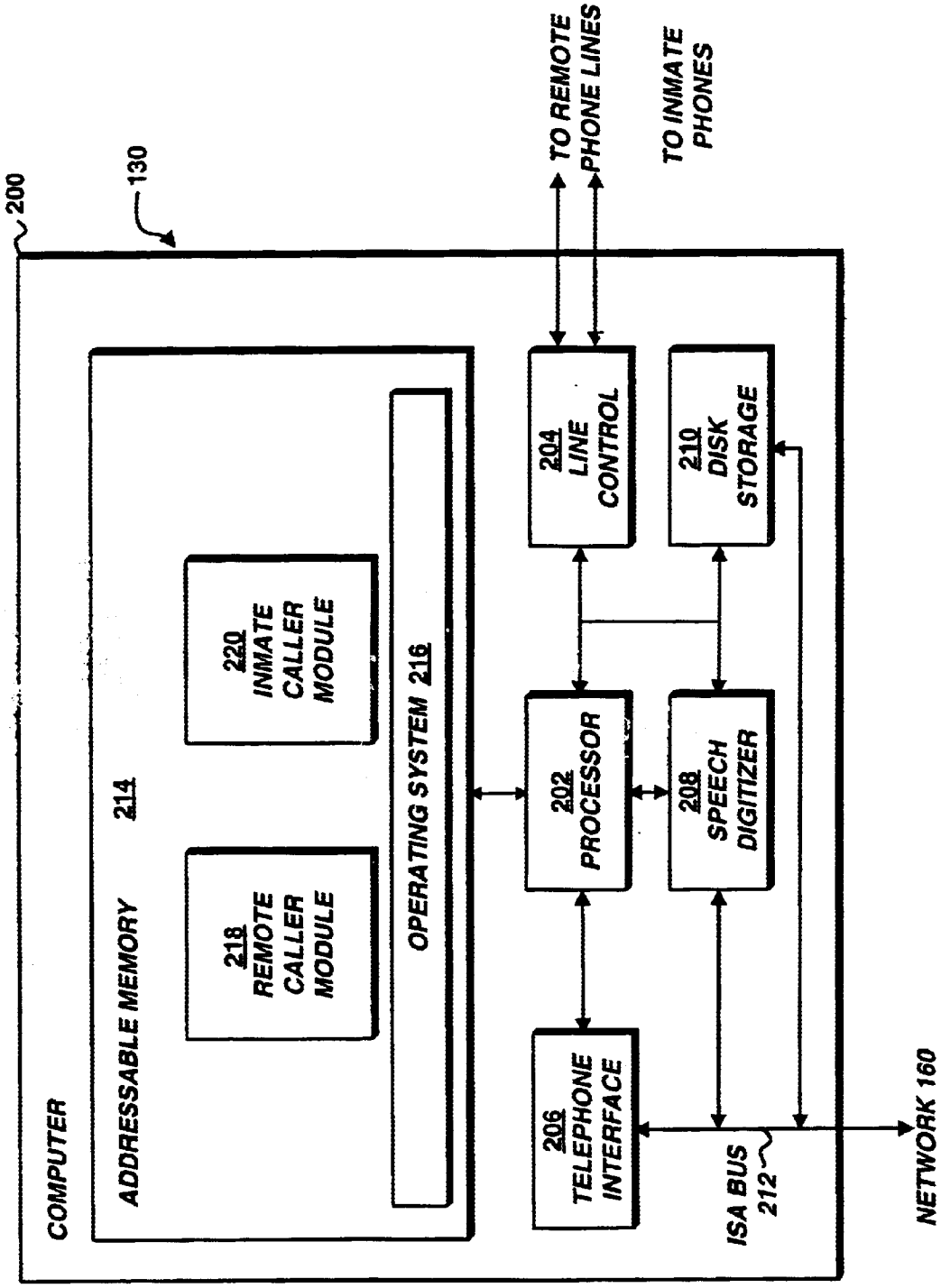
200
130
COMPUTER
ADDRESSABLE MEMORY 214
218 REMOTE CALLER MODULE
220 INMATE CALLER MODULE
OPERATING SYSTEM 216
206 TELEPHONE INTERFACE
202 PROCESSOR
204 LINE CONTROL
208 SPEECH DIGITIZER
210 DISK STORAGE
TO REMOTE PHONE LINES
TO INMATE PHONES
ISA BUS 212
NETWORK 160

FIG. 2A

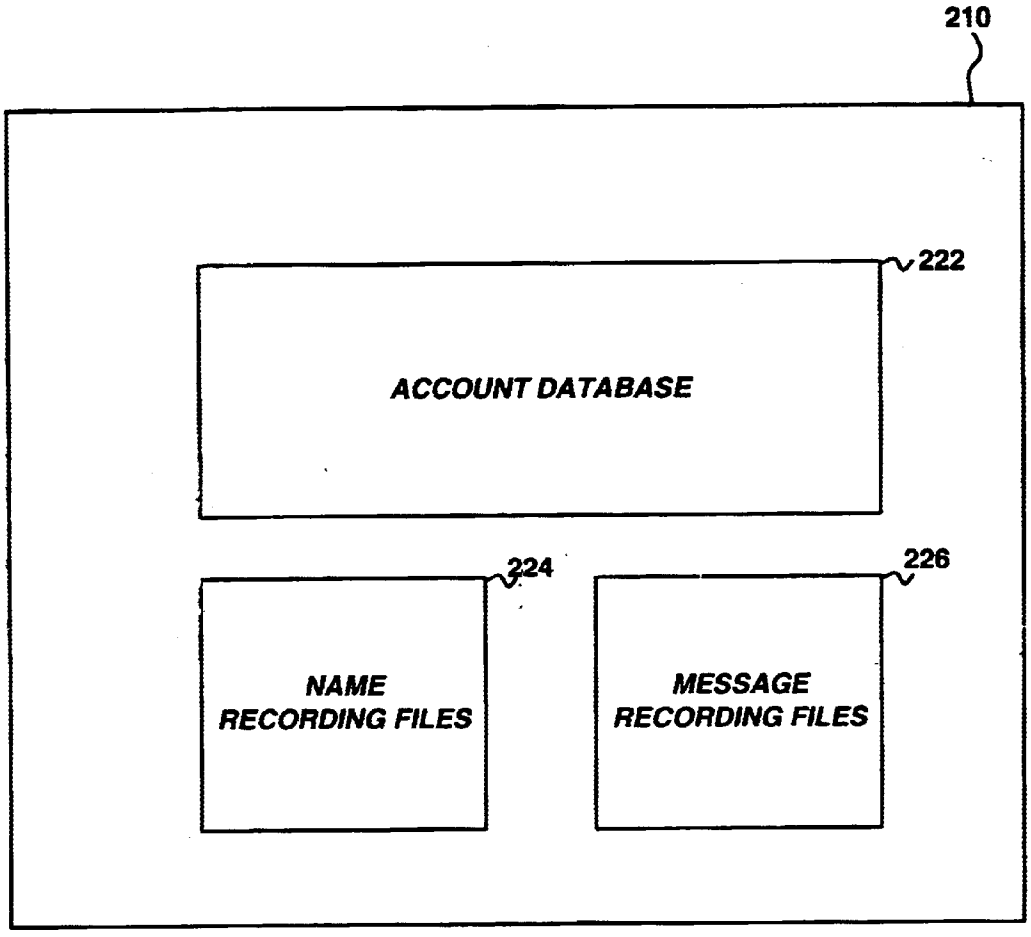
210
222
ACCOUNT DATABASE
224
NAME
RECORDING FILES
226
MESSAGE
RECORDING FILES

FIG. 2B

228

ACCOUNT INFORMATION

ACCOUNT NO.
PIN
ACCOUNT STATUS
NAME
ADDRESS
TELEPHONE NO.

MESSAGE INFORMATION

DATE OF MESSAGE
TIME OF MESSAGE
CALL BACK TIME
MESSAGE STATUS
MESSAGE CNTR.

INMATE INFORMATION

ACCOUNT NO.
PIN
NAME
INMATE NO.
CELL BLOCK NO.

FIG. 2C

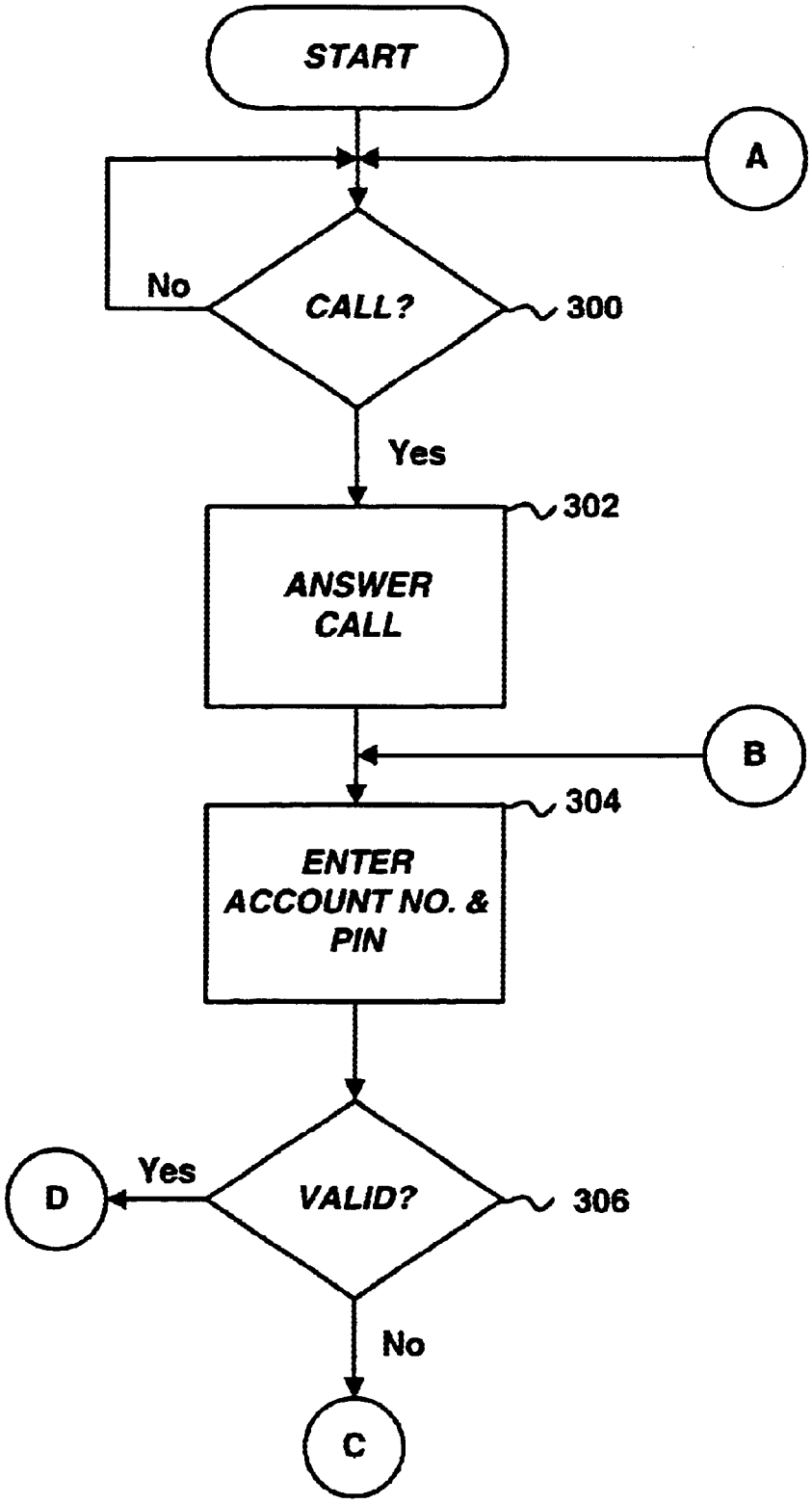
START
A
No
CALL?
300
Yes
302
ANSWER CALL
B
304
ENTER ACCOUNT NO. & PIN
Yes
D
VALID?
306
No
C

FIG. 3

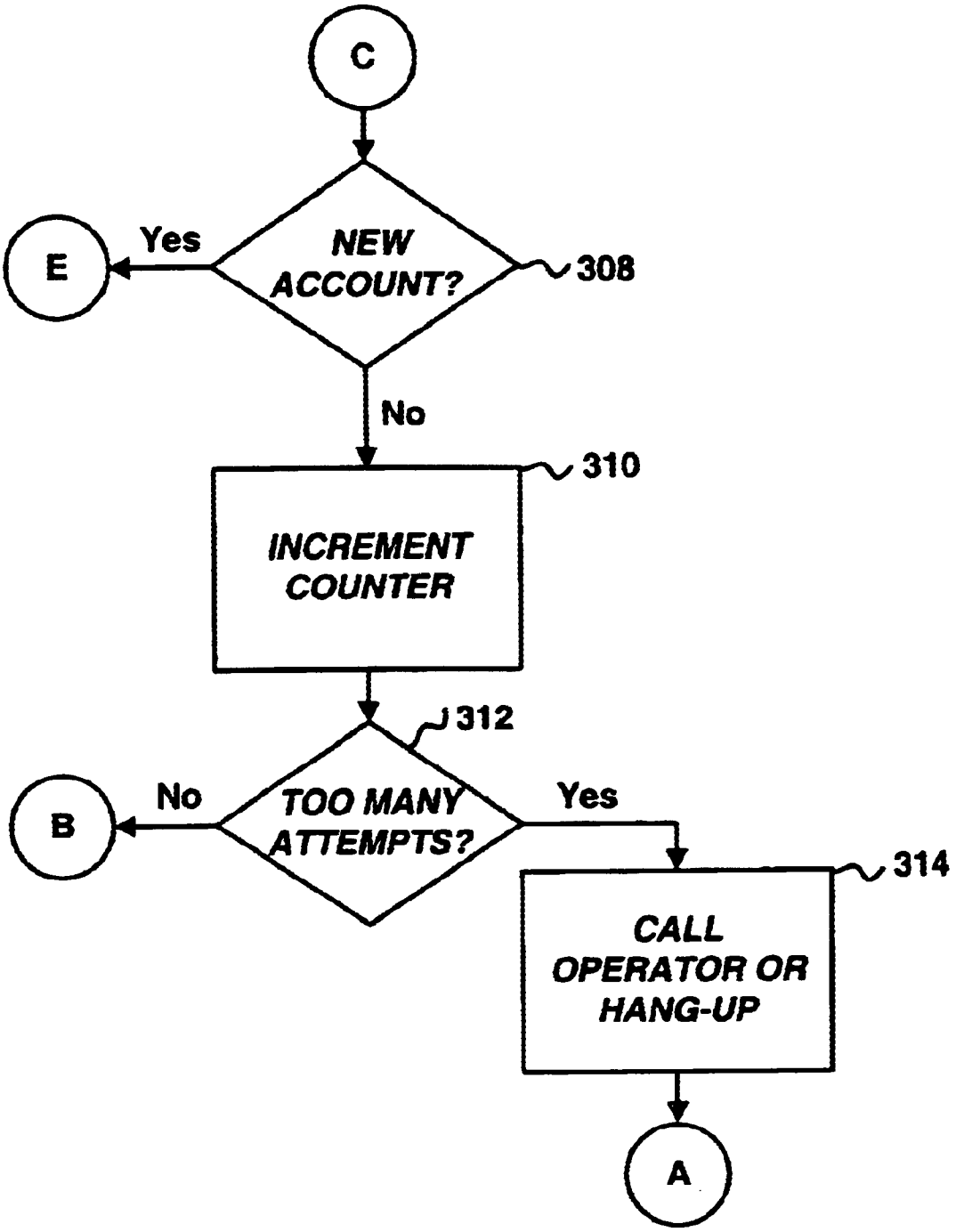
C
NEW ACCOUNT?
308
Yes
E
No
310
INCREMENT COUNTER
312
TOO MANY ATTEMPTS?
No
B
Yes
314
CALL OPERATOR OR HANG-UP
A

FIG. 4

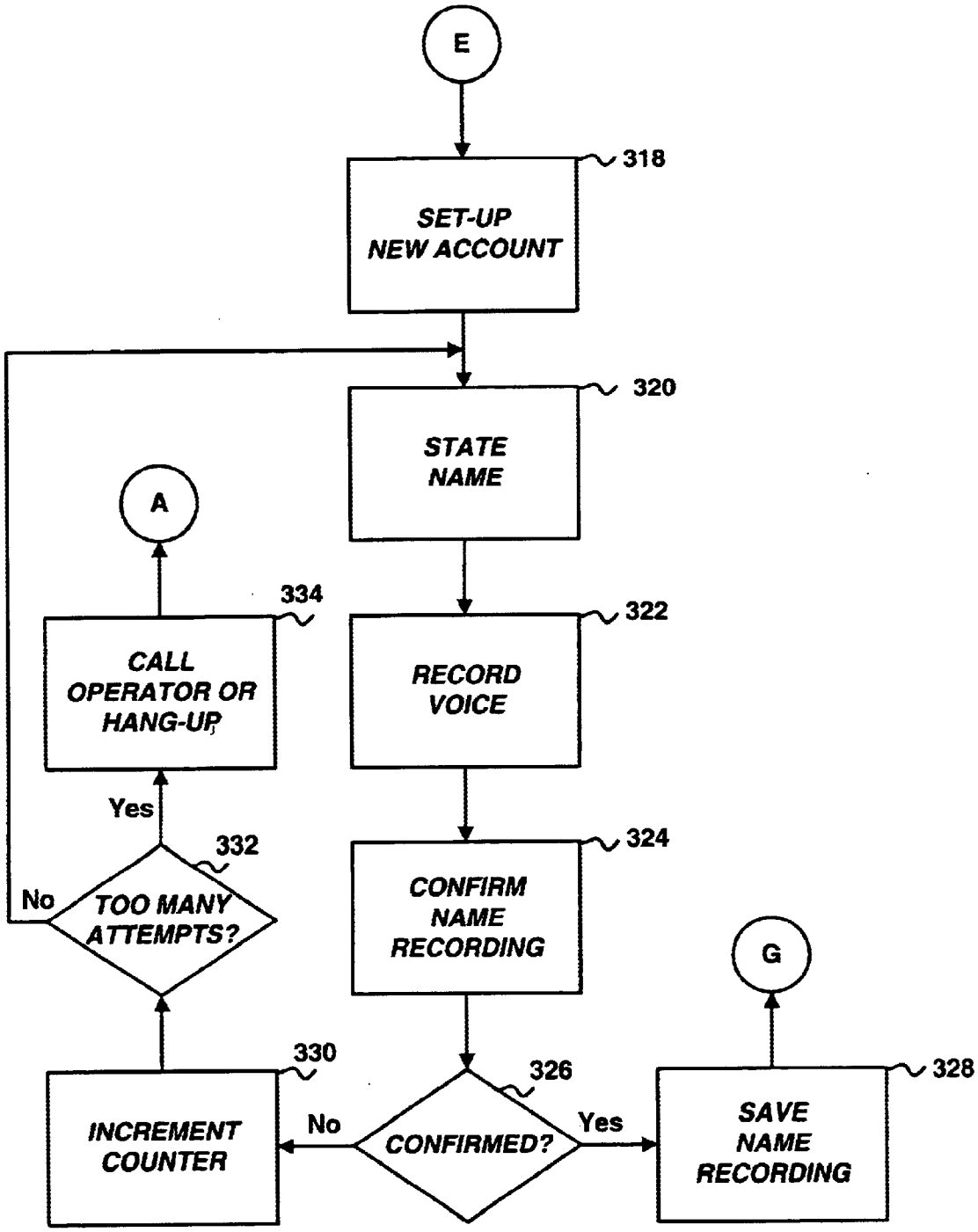
E
318
SET-UP NEW ACCOUNT
320
STATE NAME
A
334
CALL OPERATOR OR HANG-UP
322
RECORD VOICE
Yes
332
No
TOO MANY ATTEMPTS?
324
CONFIRM NAME RECORDING
G
330
326
328
INCREMENT COUNTER
No
CONFIRMED?
Yes
SAVE NAME RECORDING

FIG. 5

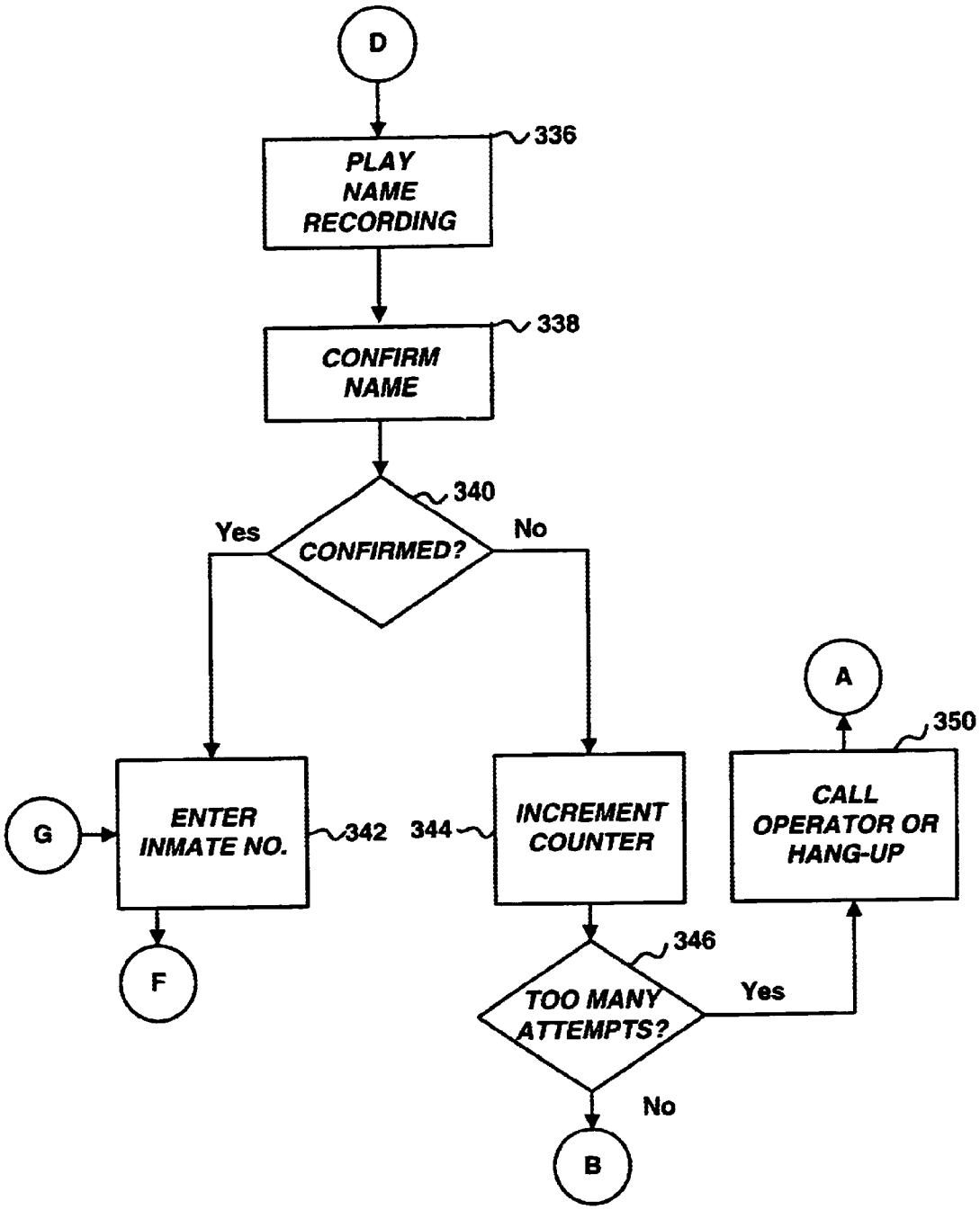
D
PLAY NAME RECORDING
336
CONFIRM NAME
338
CONFIRMED?
340
Yes
No
G
ENTER INMATE NO.
342
F
344
INCREMENT COUNTER
TOO MANY ATTEMPTS?
346
Yes
No
B
A
CALL OPERATOR OR HANG-UP
350

FIG. 6

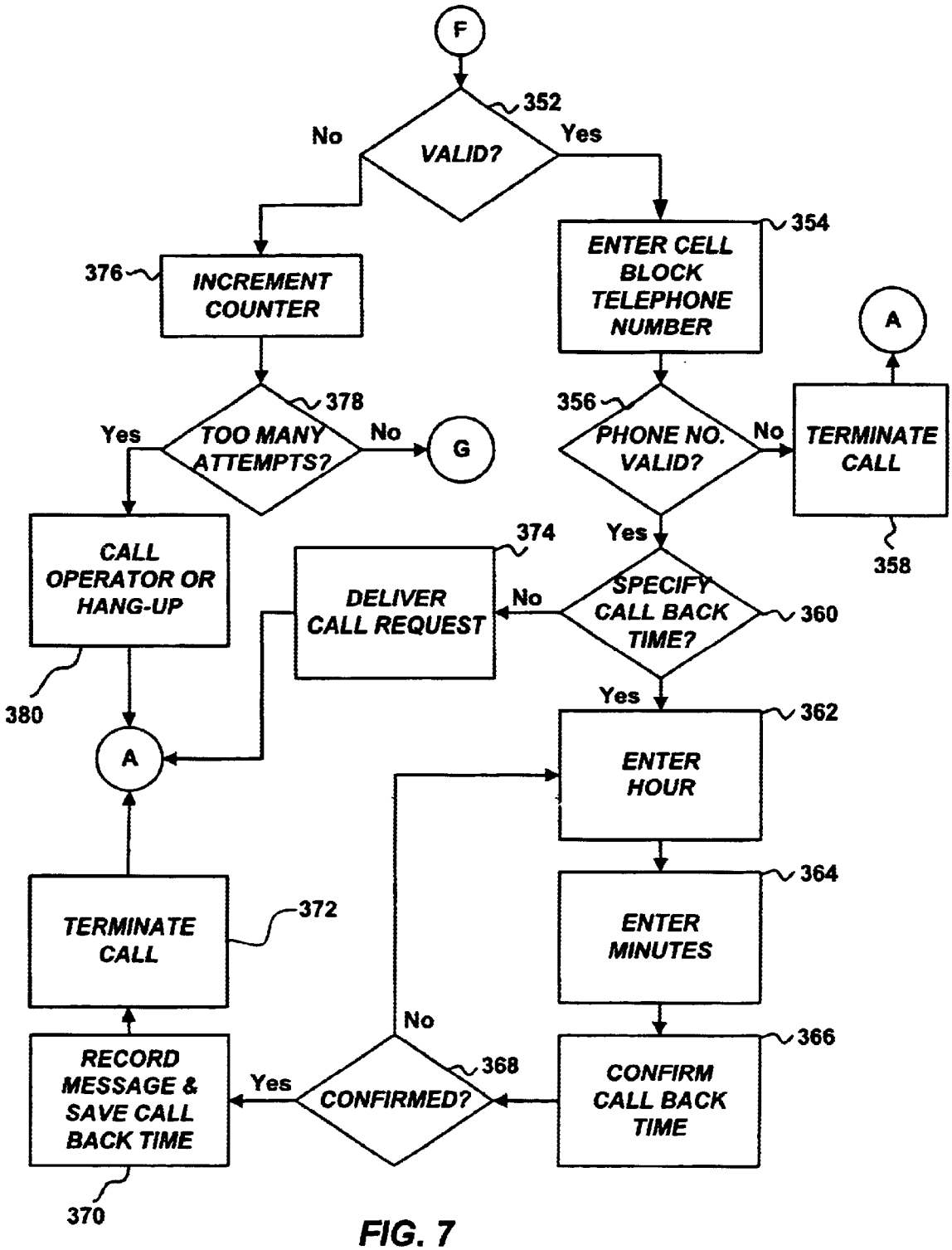
F
352
VALID?
No
Yes
354
ENTER CELL BLOCK TELEPHONE NUMBER
376
INCREMENT COUNTER
A
378
TOO MANY ATTEMPTS?
Yes
No
G
356
PHONE NO. VALID?
No
TERMINATE CALL
358
CALL OPERATOR OR HANG-UP
380
374
DELIVER CALL REQUEST
No
Yes
SPECIFY CALL BACK TIME?
360
Yes
362
ENTER HOUR
A
364
ENTER MINUTES
TERMINATE CALL
372
No
366
RECORD MESSAGE & SAVE CALL BACK TIME
Yes
CONFIRMED?
368
CONFIRM CALL BACK TIME
370

FIG. 7

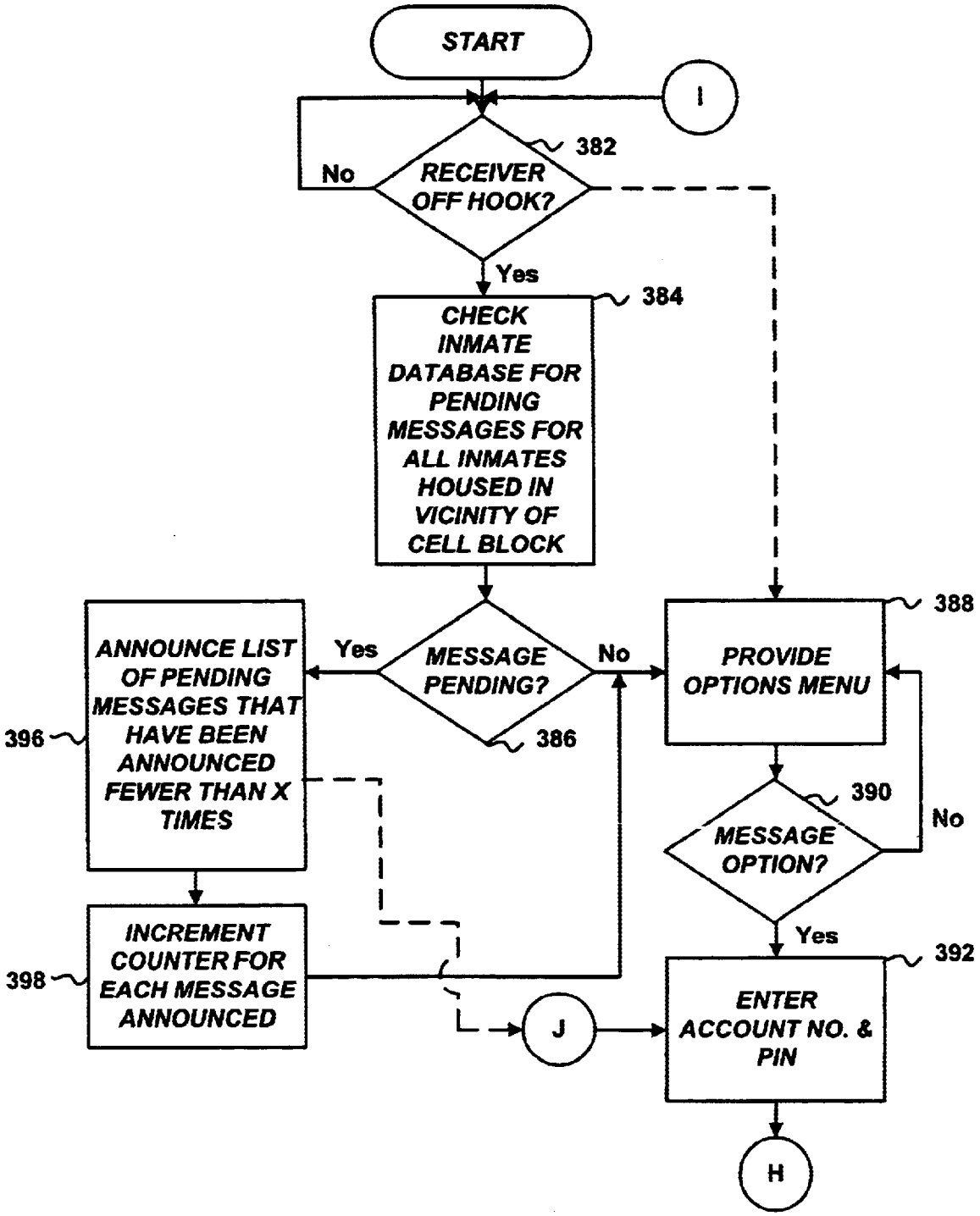
START
I
382
No
RECEIVER OFF HOOK?
Yes
384
CHECK INMATE DATABASE FOR PENDING MESSAGES FOR ALL INMATES HOUSED IN VICINITY OF CELL BLOCK
388
ANNOUNCE LIST OF PENDING MESSAGES THAT HAVE BEEN ANNOUNCED FEWER THAN X TIMES
Yes
MESSAGE PENDING?
No
PROVIDE OPTIONS MENU
396
386
390
No
MESSAGE OPTION?
INCREMENT COUNTER FOR EACH MESSAGE ANNOUNCED
Yes
392
398
J
ENTER ACCOUNT NO. & PIN
H

FIG. 8

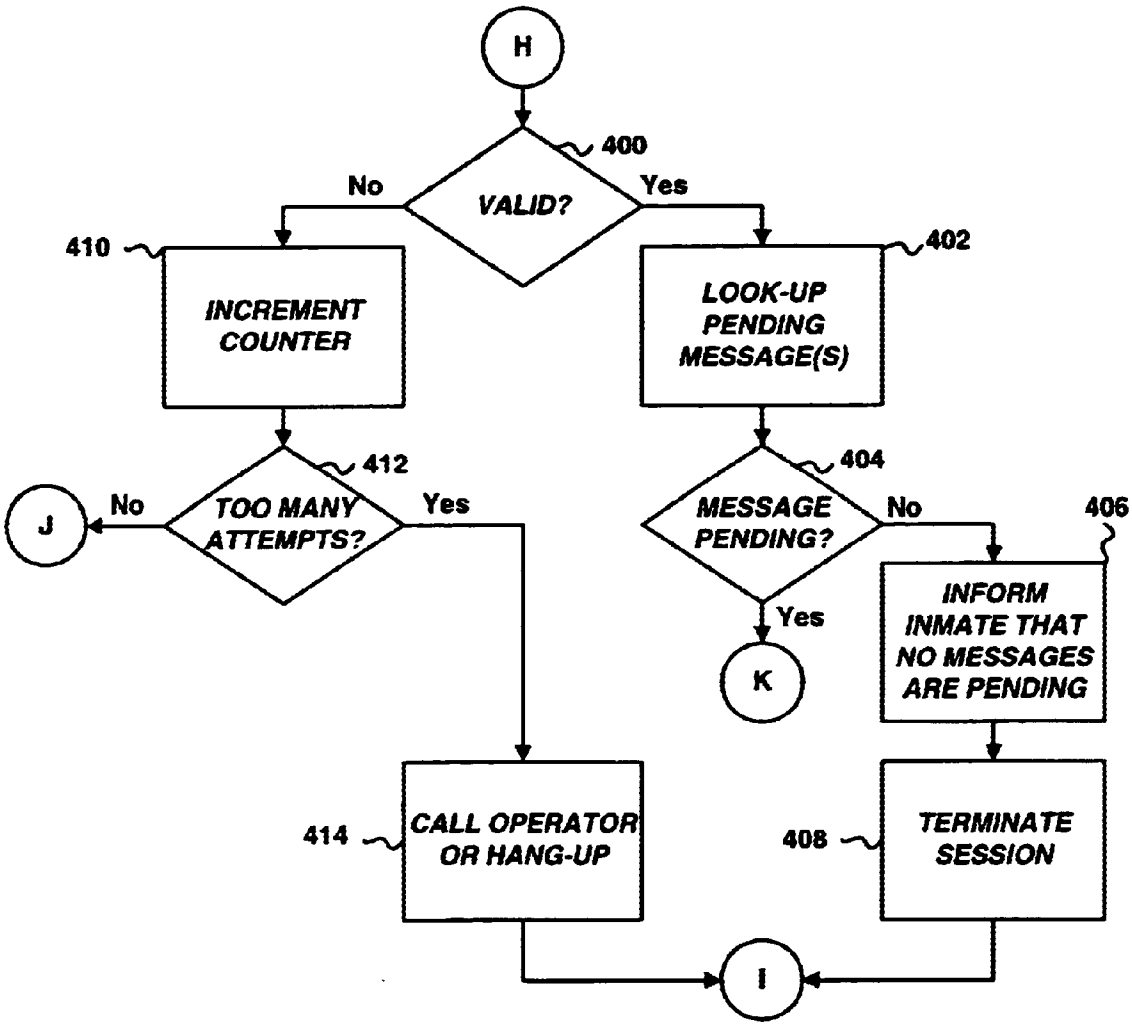
H
400
VALID?
No
Yes
410
INCREMENT COUNTER
402
LOOK-UP PENDING MESSAGE(S)
412
TOO MANY ATTEMPTS?
No
J
Yes
404
MESSAGE PENDING?
No
406
INFORM INMATE THAT NO MESSAGES ARE PENDING
Yes
K
414
CALL OPERATOR OR HANG-UP
408
TERMINATE SESSION
I

FIG. 9

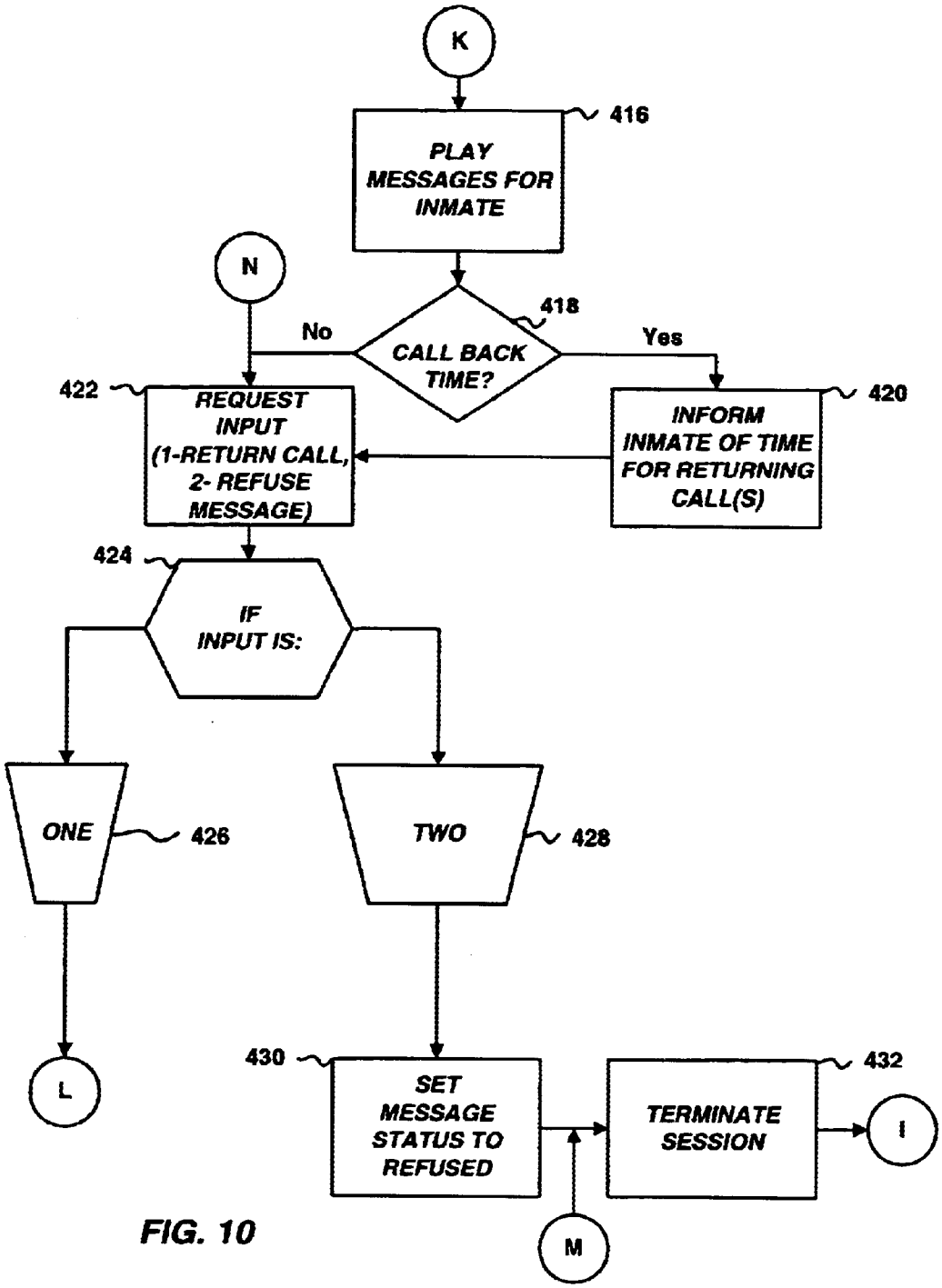
K
416
PLAY MESSAGES FOR INMATE
N
418
No
CALL BACK TIME?
Yes
422
REQUEST INPUT (1-RETURN CALL, 2- REFUSE MESSAGE)
420
INFORM INMATE OF TIME FOR RETURNING CALL(S)
424
IF INPUT IS:
ONE
426
TWO
428
L
430
SET MESSAGE STATUS TO REFUSED
432
TERMINATE SESSION
I
M

FIG. 10

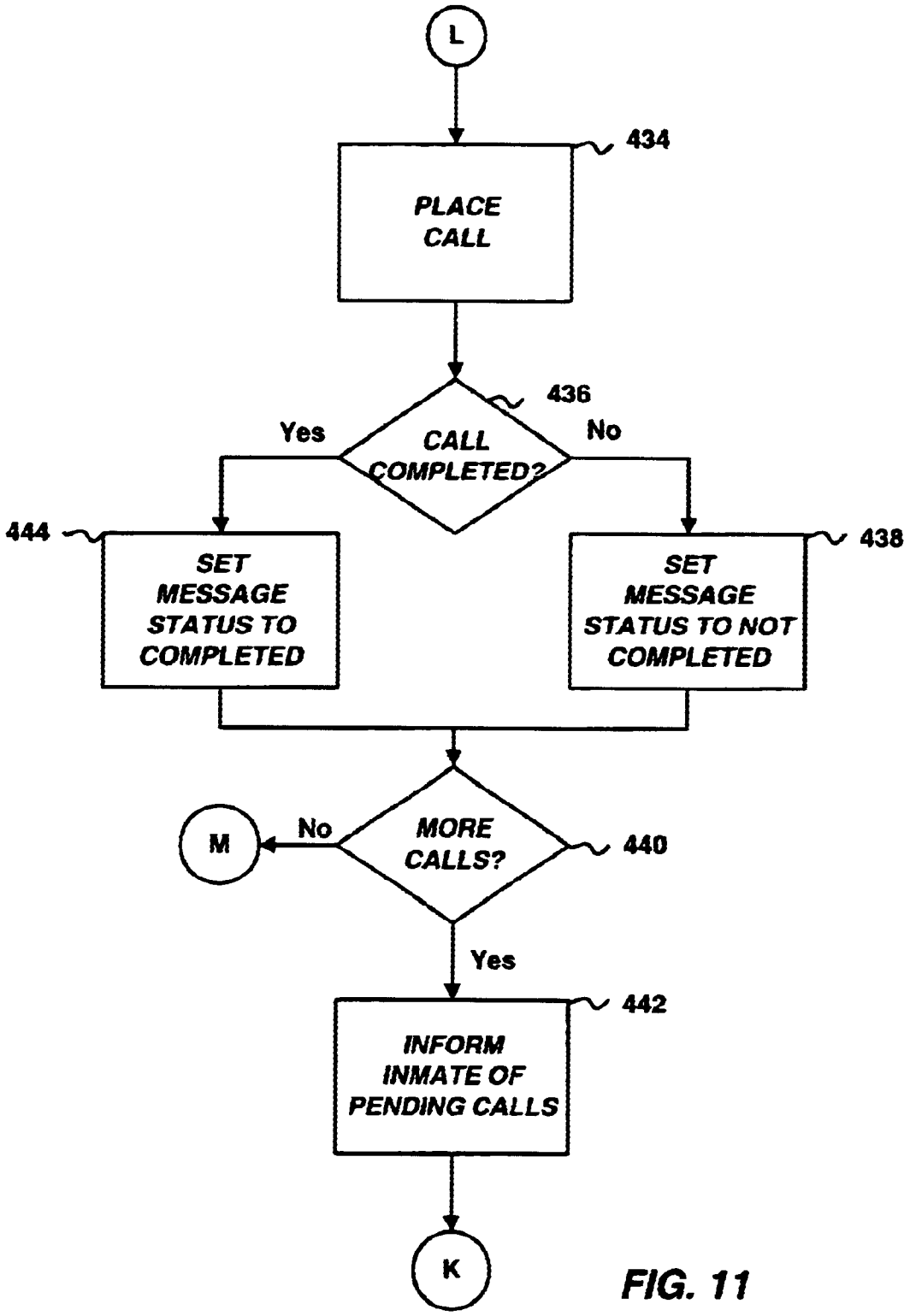
L
434
PLACE CALL
436
CALL COMPLETED?
Yes
No
444
SET MESSAGE STATUS TO COMPLETED
438
SET MESSAGE STATUS TO NOT COMPLETED
M
No
MORE CALLS?
440
Yes
442
INFORM INMATE OF PENDING CALLS
K

FIG. 11

INMATE MESSAGING SYSTEM AND METHOD

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to the field of telecommunications and, more particularly, to an inmate messaging system and method for notifying an inmate in a prison facility of messages received from a caller outside the prison facility.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Conventional inmate telephone systems and methods require an inmate to arrange a time with a remote party for executing a telephone call. Unfortunately, the remote party often cannot take the call from the inmate because of sudden schedule conflicts, thus forcing the inmate to call again at a later time. These repetitive outgoing calls, when multiplied by the number of inmates in a typical prison facility, can generate large telephone bills that must be paid by the prison facility.

In conventional messaging systems, a user acquires a messaging device from a service provider. The user is contacted by a third party by calling into a messaging system which, in turn, calls the user's pager to deliver a voice or numeric message from the third party. Such conventional systems, however, are not practical in a controlled prison environment where prisoners' communications with remote parties must be carefully monitored for illegal activity. Nor is it desirable to place electronic devices in the hands of prisoners who are notorious for their clever exploitation of prison property for personal gain or advantage.

Accordingly, there is a need within the inmate telephone industry to facilitate notification of inmates when a remote party desires to communicate with an inmate via the inmate telephone system. Such a system and method should capture and allocate costs associated with operating the inmate telephone system, and facilitate the billing of the appropriate remote parties. Additionally, such a system and method should be adapted to function in a prison environment to prevent the inmates from exploiting the system for personal gain or advantage.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to an inmate messaging system and method for notifying an inmate in a prison facility of messages received from a caller outside the prison facility.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a remote caller establishes a message account with an inmate messaging system responsible for providing messaging services to a prison facility. The remote caller's account information is processed by the inmate messaging system in an automated manner. Preferably, remote caller accounts are accessed with, for example, an account number and a Personal Identification Number ("PIN"), or other identification information, such as voice recognition or bar codes on calling cards. If PINs are used, then a different PIN can be assigned to the remote caller and the inmate to allow both parties to access the same account. Each remote caller can contact several inmates, but each inmate preferably appears on an active list of inmates stored in an remote caller database in the inmate messaging system. Charges for use of the system can be based on a per inmate basis.

A remote caller can activate the messaging service by recording his or her name when setting up an account with

the inmate messaging system. These name recordings are used by the inmate messaging system to identify the owner of the account when an inmate retrieves messages, and to verify the account when the remote caller leaves a message for an inmate.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a remote caller creates a name recording by dialing into the inmate messaging system and recording his or her name in response to audio message prompts. The remote caller's name is digitized by a speech digitizer and written to a file in disk storage. The remote caller is then allowed to hear and confirm the name recording. If the remote caller confirms the name recording, the remote caller continues with the call session. If the remote caller rejects the name recording, a predetermined number of additional attempts to get an acceptable recording are offered to the remote caller. If these attempts fail also, the remote caller must call a messaging service operator for assistance. Name recordings may not be changed after the initial setup session without first contacting the messaging service operator.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, an audio menu of options is provided to an inmate when he picks up the receiver of the inmate telephone system. If messages are pending for inmates residing in the vicinity of the phone (e.g., within a prison cell block), one option is to retrieve a list of such messages. Preferably, the inmate messaging system plays back the list of pending messages for inmates in the cell block in response to an inmate lifting the telephone receiver off its hook. The inmate messaging system also provides a function that allows inmates to check their own messages.

To simplify the checking of pending messages by inmates, digitized name recordings can be played back to the inmate instead of account or PIN numbers. For example, when checking for messages for a specific inmate, the inmate messaging system asks the inmate to enter an account number and a PIN. The inmate then enters an account number and PIN. If one or more messages exist for that account number, the inmate messaging system informs the inmate of the pending messages by playing the recorded name of the remote caller that is associated with the message account storing the message.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, after the inmate messaging system identifies pending messages for the inmate, the inmate messaging system informs the inmate that a return call can be made to the remote caller at anytime, or at a specific time entered by the remote caller. If no specific time is stated, the inmate messaging system asks the inmate if he/she wants to return the call now, later, or never by pressing the appropriate key on the telephone. Depending on the inmate's response, the inmate messaging system will place the call and mark the message as completed, or if refused, mark the message as refused. The remote caller can then retrieve this information to determine the disposition of the call, thus precluding the remote caller from thinking that the inmate telephone system is not working. If there is a specific time listed for the inmate to return a call, the inmate is informed of such time and prompted to call back at that time. Preferably, pending messages for a particular inmate are delivered to the cell block where the inmate is housed each time an inmate picks up the phone receiver to place a call.

An advantage of present invention is that inmates in a prison facility can be notified of pending messages in an efficient and economical manner. For example, the preferred embodiment of the present invention allows the remote

caller to specify a call back time with the message to ensure that the remote caller is available to receive the return call from the inmate.

Another advantage of the present invention is that all messaging functions are properly controlled by the messaging system to prevent their exploitation by inmates.

Still another advantage of the present invention is the ability to track messages between remote callers and inmates for both billing and security purposes. All costs accrued during the use of the inmate messaging system are accounted for by the inmate messaging system to ensure that the appropriate party (e.g., the remote caller) is billed by the messaging service.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention has other advantages and features which will be more readily apparent from the following detailed description of the invention and the appended claims, when taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

FIG. **1** is a functional block diagram of one embodiment of a telecommunication system **100** having an inmate messaging system **130** in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **2**A is a functional block diagram of one embodiment of the inmate messaging system **130** in FIG. **1** in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **2**B is a functional block diagram of one embodiment of an account database and recording files used by inmate messaging system **130** in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **2**C is an illustration of one embodiment of a call detail record in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **3** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of a call answer and verification method in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **4** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of a new account verification method in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **5** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of a new account set-up session in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **6** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of an account confirmation and inmate specification method in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **7** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of a cell block telephone number confirmation and call back time specification method in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **8** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of an inmate message announcement method in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **9** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of an inmate message playback method in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **10** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of an inmate call back and message status method in accordance with the present invention; and

FIG. **11** is a flow diagram of one embodiment of an inmate call back and message status method in accordance with the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring to FIG. **1**, there is shown a functional block diagram of one embodiment of telecommunication system **100** having an inmate messaging system **130** in accordance with the present invention. Telecommunication system **100** includes remote telephone **110**, Public Switched Telephone Network **120** ("PSTN"), inmate messaging system **130**, inmate telephone system **140**, cell block telephone **150**, and computer network **160**. Remote telephone **110** can be any telecommunication device including a touch-tone telephone, a cellular telephone, or a personal computer coupled to conventional telephone equipment via, for example, a Telephony Applications Programming Interface ("TAPI"). The term "remote," as used herein, means a telephone outside the prison facility.

Cell block telephone **150** can be, for example, a conventional touch-tone telephone. Typically, inmate paging system **130**, inmate telephone system **140**, cell block telephone **150**, and network **160** are located within a single prison facility, as shown in FIG. **1**.

Remote telephone **110** is coupled to PSTN **120**; a worldwide public telephone network for providing voice connectivity. PSTN **120** is coupled to inmate messaging system **130**, which is described in detail with respect to FIG. **2**. Inmate messaging system **130** is coupled to inmate telephone system **140**, which, in turn, is coupled to cell block telephone **150**. Inmate telephone system **140** can be, for example, the system described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,535,261, entitled "Selectively Activated Integrated Real-time Recording Of Telephone Conversations." Alternatively, inmate messaging system **130** can be integrated into inmate telephone system **140**.

The telecommunication system **100** described above provides voice connectivity between an remote caller and an inmate in a controlled prison environment. It is noted that telecommunication system **100** is but one embodiment of the present invention, and other embodiments are possible without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention. For example, voice connectivity can also be implemented with the Integrated Services Digital Networks ("ISDN"), or any other communication medium that can transfer speech signals.

Referring to FIG. **2**A, there is shown a functional block diagram of one embodiment of inmate messaging system **130** in FIG. **1** in accordance with the present invention. Inmate messaging system **130** (hereinafter also referred to as "system **130**") includes a conventional computer **200** coupled to telephone interface card **206** and speech digitizer card **208**. Such cards are available from companies such as Dialogic, Rhetorex, and PIKA. Cards **206** and **208** are coupled to disk storage **210**, and (if desired) network **160** via a conventional bus **212**, such as an Industry Standard Architecture ("ISA") or Peripheral Component Interconnect ("PCI") bus. System **130** also includes line control cards **204** for providing switching and access control for remote telephone lines and for cell block telephones connected to system **130**. Cards **206** and **208** are connected to processor **202** via conventional bus **212**.

Computer **200** includes processor **202** for running software program instructions stored in disk storage **210**. These instructions direct processor **202** to perform the various functions of system **130**. Addressable memory **214** is used as a workspace for performing program instructions and other functions for operating system **216**, remote caller module **218**, and inmate caller module **220**. Operating system **216** performs conventional computer system services for communicating with, for example, cards **206** and **208**. Remote caller module **218** is a set of software program instructions for managing telephone calls from remote callers, and for

managing account information for remote caller accounts. Inmate call module **220** is a set of software instructions for managing telephone calls with inmate callers, and for providing access to the messages from remote callers. A messaging service operator can interact with the inmate messaging system **130** via computer network **160**.

In the preferred embodiment described herein, the hardware elements of computer **200** are conventional components of a personal computer or workstation. The inventive aspects of the present invention lie primarily in the modules **218** and **220**, in the manner in which they configure and control the hardware elements shown in FIG. **2**A.

Referring to FIG. **2**B, there is shown a functional block diagram of one embodiment of account database **222**, name recording files **224**, and message recording files **226** in accordance with the present invention. Preferably, account database **222** and recording files **224** and **226** are located in disk storage **210**. These data structures, however, can also reside in remote locations outside the prison facility, where they can be accessed by system **130** through, for example, network **160**.

Each of the name recording files **224** stores a digitized recording of the name of a registered account owner in account database **222**. Name recording files **224** also include header portions that include an account number and PIN for associating the name recording files **224** with the appropriate account. Preferably, the name recordings are generated using methods described below with respect to FIGS. **5** and **6**.

Each of the message recording files **226** stores digitized messages from remote callers, which are converted into an analog signal before being played back to one or more designated inmates using conventional techniques. Like name recording files **224**, each of the message recording files **226** includes a header portion that includes the account number and PIN for associating the message recording file **226** with the appropriate account.

Account database **222** includes a call detail record for each telephone call received or placed by remote callers or inmate callers, as described below with respect to FIG. **2**C. Account database **222** also includes a list of account numbers and PINs, each of which are associated with an account. If a remote caller or inmate enters an account number and PIN, these numbers are compared against the numbers stored in account database **222** to determine their validity. The list of account numbers and PINs can be manually set-up by an inmate messaging service operator by taking the appropriate information over the telephone, via regular mail, or through a web site.

Additionally, each account in the account database **222** includes an active list of inmates that may be contacted by a remote caller for that account, and a cell block number identifying the cell block housing the inmate. If an inmate is not on the active list, system **130** will not connect the call or record a message for the inmate. Preferably, the active list includes a cell block telephone number, which is updated regularly by, for example, a system administrator to account for the release or transfer of inmates, or any other events that warrant an update. In one embodiment, the cell block telephone number can be compared against a cell block telephone number entered by the remote caller when attempting to leave a message for an inmate. This prevents a remote caller from calling cell blocks that do not house inmates on the caller's active list. If the cell block telephone number cannot be matched, the remote caller can call the prison facility to determine where the inmate is currently housed.

Referring to FIG. **2**C, there is shown an illustration of one embodiment of a call detail record **228** ("CDR **228**") in accordance with the present invention. Inmate messaging system **130** generates and updates a CDR **228** for each call received or placed by a remote caller or inmate. Each CDR **228** includes a plurality of data fields. Each field belongs to at least one of three categories: account information, message information, or inmate information, as illustrated in FIG. **2**C. Preferably, account information includes: account number, PIN, account status, name, address, and telephone number. The account number can be, for example, a unique twelve digit number for identifying and indexing a specific account in database **222**. The PIN number is, for example, a unique four to six digit number for preventing unauthorized access to information stored in the remote caller's account. The account number is first entered into system **130**, followed by the PIN number. Both numbers are entered into system **130** by the remote caller by pressing the appropriate buttons on a touch-tone telephone in response to audio prompts. Alternatively, voice recognition techniques can be employed, either independently or in combination with an account number and PIN.

The account status field is used to indicate the status of the account. For example, the account status field can be used to indicate whether an account is active or inactive. An inactive account can be, for example, a new account or an account that has been suspended for delinquent payments, or for violation of prison rules and/or policies.

Additionally, the CDR **228** includes the remote caller's name, address, and telephone number. There can be separate fields for the caller's home residence and business address. Other fields may also be added to CDR **228**, such as an email address, or a social security number and/or date of birth for security purposes.

Message information preferably includes: date of message, time of message, call back time, message status, and a message counter. If a call is received by inmate messaging system **130**, the date and time of the call is recorded in CDR **228**. The time can be store in either standard time or military time. If standard time, the time will be marked as A.M. or P.M., where appropriate.

The call back time is an optional field specified by the remote caller during a call session. The call back time is the time that the remote caller would like the inmate to return the call. The call back time can be a single discrete time or a time range (e.g., 1:00 PM to 2:00 PM).

Message status reflects the status of the message left by the remote caller. For example, the message status can indicate whether the inmate took the call or refused the call. The message status provides an advantage by enabling the remote caller to determine whether or not a message was actually received by an inmate. Without the message status field, a remote caller could not determine whether the inmate telephone system **140** failed, or whether the inmate refused the call.

A message counter field is also included in CDR **228** to provide a count of the number of times a message has been announced, as described in further detail with respect to FIG. **8**.

Inmate information preferably includes: account number, PIN, name, inmate number, and cell block telephone number. The account number and PIN for the inmate can be the same as or different from the account number and PIN listed under account information in FIG. **2**C. The name and inmate number are used to identify the inmate. The cell block telephone number is used to connect to a particular tele-

phone in a particular cell block in the prison facility. The cell block telephone number is used by system **130** to deliver messages to the appropriate cell block, as indicated by the cell block number field in CDR **228**.

An advantage of using CDR **228** is the ability to automatically document pertinent accounting information during a call. For example, the information contained in the CDR **228** (e.g., name, address) can be used for billing purposes. This information provides economic benefits by allowing the system to allocate costs to the remote caller, rather than have the prison facility absorb the costs at taxpayers' expense.

Having described the inmate messaging system **130** in detail, the operation of the inmate messaging system **130** will now be described below. To facilitate the reader's understanding of the operation of present invention, the present invention will be described first from the perspective of a remote caller (hereinafter also referred to as the "remote caller side") and, secondly, from the perspective of an inmate caller (hereinafter also referred to as "the inmate caller side"). The description that follows may include audio messages that the inmate messaging system **130** plays for the remote caller and the inmate caller. It is noted that the scope of the present invention is not limited to the specific messages described herein, and that other messages are possible without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

Remote Caller Side

In the preferred embodiment, the steps described below are implemented in software by remote caller module **218**, as shown in FIG. **2**A.

Referring to FIG. **3**, there is shown a flow diagram of one embodiment of a call detection and verification method in accordance with the present invention. System **130** is coupled to receive telephone calls initiated from remote callers, i.e., callers from outside the prison facility. If **300** a call is received, system **130** answers **302** the call and plays a recorded greeting, identifying the prison facility to let the caller determine whether they dialed the correct number. Thereafter, system **130** prompts **304** the remote caller to enter an account number and PIN. The remote caller then presses the appropriate keys on their telephone to enter the account number and PIN. When finished, the remote caller can signal system **130** by pressing, for example, the pound sign (i.e., "#"). Upon pressing the pound sign, system **130** proceeds to call an input function (not shown) for receiving and error checking the numbers entered by the remote caller against the account database **222**. The input function provides conventional range and type checking on the numbers before cross-referencing the numbers with account database **922**. If **306** one or both numbers are invalid, the method continues as described with respect to FIG. **4**. Otherwise, the method continues as described with respect to FIG. **6**. To determine whether or not a number is invalid, system **130** compares the entered numbers with numbers stored in account database **222**, as described with respect to FIG. **2**B.

If a remote caller is using system **130** for the first time, the remote caller will enter a temporary PIN issued by the messaging service operator over the telephone, via regular mail, or through a web site. In step **306**, system **130** will identify the temporary PIN as invalid, and transfer control to step **308**, as described below with respect to FIG. **4**.

Referring to FIG. **4**, there is shown one embodiment of a new account verification method in accordance with the present invention. If **308** the account is a new account, the method continues as described with respect to FIG. **5**. A new account is identified by matching its temporary PIN with a list of temporary PINs in account database **222**. Otherwise, system **130** informs the remote caller of the problem and increments **310** a counter. If the PIN is not a temporary PIN or the account number is not in the account database **222**, system **130** assumes that the entry is invalid. An account number or a PIN can be invalid because the input function detected a range or type error, or because an incorrect number was inadvertently entered. If **312** the remote caller makes too many attempts at entering the account number and/or PIN, system **130** blocks further access to the system and prompts the remote caller to either call the operator for assistance (e.g., by pressing 0), or hang-up and try again later. Thus, the system allows the remote caller a finite number of attempts (e.g., 5) to enter an account number and PIN. If **312** the number of attempts is not exceeded, the inmate messaging system **130** asks the remote caller to try again, then returns to step **304** to receive another input.

An advantage of limiting the number of attempts for entering an account number and PIN is that remote callers are prevented from finding a valid account number and PIN through trial and error, thus exploiting the inmate messaging **130** system to their gain or advantage.

If the caller chooses to hang-up, the inmate messaging system **130** calls a clean-up function and returns control to step **300**, as shown in FIG. **3**. The cleanup function occurs each time a call session is terminated. The clean-up function prepares system **130** for receiving another call by, for example, resetting counters, updating and closing files, and resetting name and message recordings. Hereinafter, each time the system **130** terminates a call or session, it is presumed that the clean-up function is performed as described above.

Referring to FIG. **5**, there is shown a flow diagram of one embodiment of a new account set-up session in accordance with the present invention. In response to a new account number, inmate messaging system **130** sets-up **318** a new account. Preferably, this includes activating the account number and PIN and initiating a name recording procedure, as described below. Once activated the account status field is updated to reflect the active status of the message account.

System **130** begins the name recording procedure by prompting the remote caller to state **320** their name after a beep tone. After the beep tone, system **130** digitally records **322** the remote caller's voice and temporarily stores the digitized recording in addressable memory **214** (FIG. **2**A). After recording the remote caller's voice, the inmate messaging system **130** asks the remote caller to confirm **324** the voice recording by replaying the recording for the remote caller. This procedure allows the remote caller to hear the name recording to determine whether it was recorded properly (e.g., good clarity, annunciation, voice inflection, etc.). If **326** the name recording is confirmed by the remote caller (e.g., by pressing an appropriate key on the telephone), the name recording is saved **328** to a name recording file **224** in disk storage **210**, and the method proceeds to step **342**, as described below with respect to FIG. **6**.

If **326** the name recording is not confirmed by the remote caller, system **130** informs the remote caller of the problem and increments **330** a counter. If not too many attempts **332** have been made, system **130** returns to step **320** to make another attempt at a name recording. Otherwise, system **130** requests the remote caller to either call **334** an operator for assistance or hang-up and try again later. If the caller chooses to hang-up, the inmate messaging system **130** calls a clean-up function and returns control to step **300**, as shown in FIG. **3**.

The name recording procedure described above is advantageous because it allows accounts to be identified by name recordings instead of account numbers and PINs, which can be difficult to remember.

Referring to FIG. **6**, is a flow diagram of one embodiment of an account confirmation and inmate specification method in accordance with the present invention. System **130** retrieves the name recording associated with the account number and PIN entered in step **304**, and plays **336** the name recording for the remote caller. System **130** then asks the remote caller to confirm **338** the account name by pressing an appropriate key (e.g., by pressing the "1" key). If **340** the account name is confirmed by the remote caller, system **130** prompts the remote caller to enter **342** an inmate number, followed by the pound sign to signal when finished entering the numbers. Each inmate in the prison facility is assigned a unique inmate number, which is used by the prison facility to identify the inmate. Preferably, a list of inmate numbers is stored in account database **222** for comparing with the inmate number entered by the remote caller in step **342**.

If **340** the inmate number is not confirmed **340** by the remote caller, system **130** increments **344** a counter. If **346** too many attempts have been made, the system **130** requests the remote caller to either call **350** the operator for assistance or hang-up and try again later. If the caller chooses to hang-up, system **130** calls a clean-up function and returns control to step **300**, as shown in FIG. **3**. If **346** not too many attempts have been made, system **130** returns to step **304** to receive another input, as described with respect to FIG. **3**.

Referring to FIG. **7**, there is shown a flow diagram of one embodiment of a cell block telephone number confirmation and call back time specification method in accordance with the present invention. After the remote caller enters **342** the inmate number, system **130** calls an input function to check for range and type errors. If the number is successfully entered, system **130** compares the number to an active list of inmate numbers in database **222** (FIG. **2**B). If **352** the entered number is not valid (e.g., no match), the remote caller is informed of the problem, and system **130** increments **376** a counter. If **378** too many attempts have been made, system **130** requests that the remote caller either call **380** the operator for assistance or hang-up and try again later. The system **130** then terminates the call and returns to step **300**, as shown in FIG. **3**. If **378** not too many attempts to enter an inmate number have been made, system **130** returns to step **342** to receive another input, as shown in FIG. **6**.

If **352** the inmate number is valid (e.g., match found), the system **130** prompts the remote caller to enter **354** a cell block telephone number. If **356** the cell block number telephone number is invalid (e.g., the cell block telephone number does not correspond to an inmate on the active list of inmates for the account), system **130** terminates the call, calls a clean-up function, then returns control to step **300**, as shown in FIG. **3**. If **356** the cell block telephone number is valid (e.g., the cell block telephone number corresponds to an inmate on the active list of inmates for the account), system **130** asks the remote caller if they would like to specify a call back time (e.g., a time for the inmate to return the call). If **360** the remote caller wants to specify a call back time (e.g., by pressing the pound key), the system **130** proceeds to prompt the remote call to first enter **362** an hour and then enter **364** minutes, thus establishing a call back time. The call back time can be entered in either standard or military time formats. If the standard time format is used, the system **130** will also prompt the caller to designate A.M. or P.M., where appropriate. Additionally, the call back time can be entered as a discrete time or as a time range.

After the remote caller successfully enters the call back time, the system **130** confirms **366** the time by providing an audio feedback of the time to the remote caller. If **368** the call back time is not confirmed, the system **130** returns to step **362** to receive another input. Otherwise, the system **130** proceeds to record **370** a message from the remote caller, if any, and save the call back time in CDR **228** located in account database **222** (FIG. **2**C). After saving the message and the call back time, system **130** terminates **372** the call, executes a clean-up function, then proceeds to step **300**, as shown in FIG. **3**.

An advantage exists in allowing the remote caller to specify a time for the inmate to return the call. By specifying a time for the inmate to call, problems associated with the remote caller not being able to take an inmate's return call (e.g., logistics, costs) can be reduced by providing the inmate with a specific time or time range for calling back the remote caller.

If **360** the remote caller does not wish to specify a call back time, the system **130** delivers **374** the call request by automatically dialing the cell block telephone number in the cell block where the inmate is housed. If a connection is established with the cell block telephone **150**, the system **130** returns to step **300** to receive the next call. If no connection is made, the system **130** informs the remote caller of the situation, asks the remote caller to try again later, terminates the call, executes a clean-up function, and returns to step **300**, as shown in FIG. **3**.

Having described the preferred embodiment of the remote caller side of the present invention, the inmate caller side of the inmate messaging system **130** will now be described.

Inmate Caller Side

In the preferred embodiment, the methods described below are implemented in software by the inmate caller module **220** (FIG. **2**A).

Referring to FIG. **8**, there is shown a flow diagram of one embodiment of an inmate message announcement method in accordance with the present invention. If **382** an inmate lifts the cell block telephone **150** receiver off its hook, system **130** checks **384** account database **222** for pending messages for all inmates located within the vicinity of the cell block telephone **150**, which can be all or part of a prison cell block. Preferably, if the inmate lifts the cell block telephone **150** receiver off its hook, a signal is sent from the cell block telephone **150** to system **130** to notify system **130** that an inmate would like to check for messages. This signal is also used by system **130** to identify the cell block telephone for purposes of message delivery.

If **386** any messages are pending, the system **130** will announce **396** a list of the messages over the cell block telephone **150**. Preferably, the list includes messages for all inmates within the cell block, thus precluding each inmate from having to individually check for a list of their own messages. Each message in database **222** is associated with a CDR **228**, which includes a cell block number field that is used by system **130** to deliver pending messages to the appropriate cell block telephone **150**. Each CDR **228** also has a message counter field which is incremented **398** each time a message in the message list is announced. System **130** will only announce **396** the pending messages that have been announced fewer than a predetermined number times (e.g., five times). This will prevent an overload of pending messages which could take a long time to announce. During the announcement of the list of pending messages, the inmate can press a key (e.g., the pound key) at any time to stop the

announcement and access their own messages. After the list of pending messages is announced, the system provides **388** an audio menu of options. The options allow an inmate to, for example, retrieve messages, leave messages for others, make a call, access a help menu, or connect to an operator. Alternatively, if **382** an inmate lifts the receiver off its hook, the system **130** immediately provides **388** the audio menu of options to the inmate, thus skipping steps **384**, **386**, **396**, and **398**.

If **390** the inmate selects a messaging function from the menu of options, system **130** prompts the inmate to enter **392** an account number and PIN. System **130** then calls an input function to perform range and type checking on the entered numbers. If the numbers are accepted by the input function, the method continues as described with respect to FIG. **9**.

Referring to FIG. **9**, there is shown a flow diagram of one embodiment of an inmate message playback method in accordance with the present invention. If **400** the account number and PIN are valid, the system **130** looks-up **402** the inmate's messages in account database **222**. If **404** no messages are pending for the inmate, the system **130** informs **406** the inmate that no messages were found, the system **130** terminates **408** the call session, executes a clean-up function, and returns to step **382**, as shown in FIG. **8**. If **400** the account number or PIN is not valid, system **130** increments **410** a counter. If **412** too many attempts have been made, the inmate is requested to either call the operator for assistance or hang-up and try again later. If **412** not to many attempts have been made, the system **130** returns to step **392** to receive another input, as described with respect to FIG. **8**. If **404** one or more messages are pending for the inmate, the system **130** continues to step **416**, as described with respect to FIG. **10**.

Referring to FIG. **10**, there is shown a flow diagram of one embodiment of an inmate call back and message status method in accordance with the present invention. If **404** one or more messages are pending for the inmate, system **130** plays **416** each message(s) for the inmate in, for example, chronological order. The inmate is provided with several options at step **416**, which includes, for example, stopping, rewinding, or skipping the message. If **418** the remote caller specified a call back time in step **360** (FIG. **7**), system **130** informs **420** the inmate of the call back time for each message, where appropriate. If **418** no call back time was specified or after the inmate is informed **420** of any call back time, system **130** requests **422** the inmate to: 1) immediately return the call, or 2) refuse the message. If **424** the inmate enters **426** "1," the system **130** proceeds to place the call, as described in detail with respect to FIG. **11**. Otherwise, if **424** the inmate enters **428** "2," system **130** sets **430** the message status field in CDR **228** (FIG. **2**C) to "refused," executes a clean-up function, and terminates **432** the session. Alternatively, the inmate is given the option to delete the message after it has been refused.

The message status field in CDR **228** provides an advantage by enabling the remote caller to determine whether or not a message was actually received by an inmate. Without the message status field, a remote caller could not determine whether the inmate telephone system **140** failed, or whether the inmate refused the call.

Referring to FIG. **11**, there is shown a flow diagram of one embodiment of an inmate call back and message status method in accordance with the present invention. If **424** the inmate enters **426** "1," system **130** places **434** a call for the inmate. If **436** the call is completed, system **130** sets **444** the messages status field in CDR **28** to "complete." A call is complete if the call is successfully connected with the remote caller. If **436** the call is not completed, system **130** sets **438** the message status field to "incomplete." After setting the message status field, system **130** determines if **440** there are messages still pending. If **440** there are more messages, system **130** informs **442** the inmate that there are more messages, then returns to step **416** to hear the next message, as previously described with respect to FIG. **10**. If **440** there are no more messages, system **130** terminates **432** the session, as described with respect to FIG. **10**.

Although the present invention has been described in considerable detail with reference to certain preferred embodiments thereof, other embodiments are possible. For example, the present invention can be used in other environments that typically require a carefully controlled messaging system, such as a military facility. Thus, the scope of the present invention, as defined by the appended claims, should not be limited to the description of the preferred embodiments herein.

What is claimed is:

1. A computer-implemented method of notifying an inmate in a prison facility of messages received from an external caller outside the prison facility, comprising:

storing a plurality of caller accounts, each caller account associated with an external caller and with a list of inmates allowed to receive a message from the external caller, wherein the external caller initiates generation of the caller account;

receiving account information from an external caller in response to a request for account information;

comparing the account information with information stored in the caller account to determine whether the caller account is valid;

receiving inmate information from the external caller in response to requests for inmate information;

comparing the inmate information with known information stored in the caller account to determine whether the inmate is on the list of inmates allowed to receive messages from the external caller;

recording a message from the external caller in response to a request from the external caller to leave a message; and

storing the message in a file associated with the account information for future retrieval by the inmate.

2. The method of claim of **1**, further comprising:

prompting the external caller to state his name;

recording the voice of the external caller as the external caller states his name;

digitizing the recording; and

storing the recording in a file associated with the account information.

3. The method of claim **2**, further comprising:

playing the recording for the external caller;

prompting the external caller to confirm the recording; and

receiving a response from the external caller indicating that the external caller confirms the recording.

4. The method of claim **2**, further comprising:

preventing the external caller from making more than a predetermined number of attempts to record the voice of the external caller.

5. The method of claim of **1**, further comprising:

prompting the external caller to enter a personal identification number; and

receiving the personal identification number entered by the external caller.

6. The method of claim **5**, further comprising:

preventing the external caller from making more than a predetermined number of attempts to enter the personal identification number.

7. The method of claim **1**, further comprising:

prompting the external caller to enter a call back time for the inmate to call back the external caller;

receiving a call back time entered by the external caller; and

storing the call back time in a file associated with the account information for future retrieval by the inmate or the external caller.

8. A computer-readable medium having stored thereon instructions which, when executed by a processor, cause the processor to perform the steps of:

storing a plurality of caller accounts, each caller account associated with an external caller and with a list of inmates allowed to receive a message from the external caller, wherein the external caller initiates generation of the caller account;

receiving account information from the external caller in response to a request for account information;

comparing the account information with information stored in the caller account to determine whether the caller account is valid;

receiving inmate information from the external caller in response to requests for inmate information;

comparing the inmate information with known information stored in the caller account to determine whether the inmate is on the list of inmates allowed to receive messages from the external caller;

recording a message from the external caller in response to a request from the external caller to leave a message; and

storing the message in a file associated with the account information for future retrieval by the inmate.

9. A computer-implemented method of notifying a called inmate in a prison facility of messages received from a caller outside the prison facility, comprising:

receiving a message from the caller for the called inmate after determining that the called inmate is included in a list of inmates allowed to receive messages from the caller, wherein the called inmate is prevented from generating the list;

checking a database for at least one message belonging to the called inmate in the prison facility;

detecting the received message;

announcing the received message to the called inmate;

providing a plurality of options to the called inmate, at least one option for playing the received message for the called inmate; and

playing the received message for the called inmate in response to the called inmate selecting the option for playing the message.

10. The method of claim **9**, further comprising:

prompting the called inmate to enter a personal identification number; and

receiving the personal identification number entered by the called inmate.

11. The method of claim **10**, further comprising:

preventing the called inmate from making more than a predetermined number of attempts to enter the personal identification number.

12. The method of claim **9**, wherein the announcing step further comprises:

announcing only those messages that have been previously announced fewer than a predetermined number of times.

13. The method of claim **9**, further comprising:

allowing the called inmate to select an option from the group of options consisting of returning the call and refusing the call.

14. The method of claim **13**, further comprising:

recording the option selected by the called inmate for future retrieval by the called inmate.

15. The method of claim **9** further comprising:

informing the called inmate that the caller has specified a call back time for returning the call.

16. A computer-readable medium having stored thereon instructions which, when executed by a processor, cause the processor to perform steps comprising:

receiving a message from the caller for an inmate after determining that the inmate is included in a list of inmates allowed to receive messages from the caller, wherein the inmate is prevented from generating the list;

checking a database for at least one message belonging to an inmate housed within the prison facility;

detecting the received message;

announcing the received message to the inmate;

providing a plurality of options to the inmate, at least one option for playing the received message for the inmate; and

playing the received message for the inmate in response to the inmate selecting the option for playing the message.

17. An inmate messaging system for notifying an inmate in a prison facility of telephone messages received from a caller outside the prison facility, comprising:

line control devices configured to interface the inmate messaging system with a telephone network;

a processor coupled to the line control devices configured to process telephone signals received from the telephone network;

a memory coupled to the processor, the memory comprising:

a remote caller module configured to cause the processor to perform steps comprising:

storing a plurality of caller accounts, each caller account associated with a caller and with a list of inmates allowed to receive a message from the caller, wherein inmates are prevented from generating the caller account;

receiving account information from a caller in response to a request for account information;

comparing the account information with information stored in the caller account to determine whether the caller account is valid;

receiving inmate information from the caller in response to requests for inmate information;

comparing the inmate information with known information stored in the caller account to determine whether the inmate is on the list of inmates allowed to receive messages from the caller;

recording a message from the caller in response to a request from the caller to leave a message; and

storing the message in a file associated with the account information for future retrieval by the inmate;

an inmate caller module configured to cause the processor to perform steps comprising:

checking a database for at least one message belonging to an inmate housed within the prison facility;

announcing the message to the inmate;

providing a plurality of options to the inmate, at least one option for playing the message for the inmate; and

playing the message for the inmate in response to the inmate selecting the option for playing the message.

18. The system of claim **17**, further comprising:

a speech digitizer configured to record digitally the voice of the caller in response to a prompt from the system asking the caller to state the caller's name; and

a storage device configured to store the digital recording for future retrieval by the inmate or the caller.

19. The system of claim **17**, further comprising:

a telephone interface coupled to the processor configured to interface the inmate messaging system with a computer network, the computer network configured to permit an operator to monitor and control the inmate messaging system from a remote location.

20. The system of claim **17**, wherein the memory further comprises:

a call detail record having a plurality of data fields configured to store information from at least one information category from a group of information categories consisting of account information, message information, and inmate information.

21. A computer-implemented method of notifying an inmate in a prison facility of messages received from a caller outside the prison facility, comprising:

storing a plurality of caller accounts, each caller account associated with a caller, with an account identifier, and with a list of inmates allowed to receive a message from the caller, wherein the inmates are prevented from generating the caller account;

receiving an account identifier from a caller in response to a request for an account identifier;

determining whether the account identifier is associated with a valid account;

receiving an inmate identifier from the caller in response to requests for inmate information;

determining whether the inmate is on the list of inmates associated with the caller account;

recording a message from the caller in response to a request from the caller to leave a message; and

storing the message in a file associated with the inmate for future retrieval by the inmate.

22. A method of receiving a message from a party external to an institution, intended for a party inside the institution, comprising:

storing a plurality of accounts, each account associated with an external party, with an account identifier, and with a list of internal parties allowed to receive a message from the external party, wherein the internal party is prevented from requesting preparation of the account;

receiving an account identifier from an external party in response to a request for an account identifier;

determining whether the account identifier is associated with a valid account;

receiving an identifier associated with an internal party from the caller in response to requests for an internal party identifier;

determining whether the internal party is on the list of parties associated with the account;

recording a message from the external party in response to a request from the external party to leave a message; and

storing the message in a file associated with the internal party for future retrieval by the internal party.

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