



**Testimony in Support of House Bill 7525:**

**A bill to provide free communication for people incarcerated in Rhode Island correctional facilities and their support networks**

*April 10, 2024*

Dear Chair Robert Craven, Sr., Vice-Chair Carol McEntee, Vice-Chair Jason Knight, and House Judiciary Committee members,

My name is Alyssa Ackbar, and I am a Policy Campaigns Associate at Worth Rises, a national non-profit dedicated to ending the exploitation of people impacted by incarceration. I am submitting this testimony **in support of House Bill 7525**. I've also submitted supporting documents, including a fact sheet, coalition letter, fiscal analysis, and impact stories.

Thank you for taking time to hear from the public on the impact of prison communication costs. Particularly, I hope you take note of the stories of those who have been directly impacted by incarceration and how the exorbitant cost of communication has weighed on their lives. While they share their experiences, I will focus my testimony on the policy and fiscal considerations that support this legislation.

At Worth Rises, we have helped jurisdictions across the country pass and implement policies that make communication free for incarcerated people and their support networks, including Connecticut, California, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Colorado, and more. We are continuing this work, and currently support similar ongoing campaigns in over a dozen states. Thus, we know what it takes to implement this policy and are committed to helping Rhode Island do so.

With this legislation, Rhode Island has the opportunity to join these other states and become a national leader, at the forefront of the movement. Providing relief to millions of families with incarcerated loved ones, is overdue, and accomplished simply, by making communication free.

Today, **Rhode Island families pay the state's prison telecom vendor, Securus, an estimated \$800,000 each year to speak to their incarcerated loved ones.** This money comes directly from the parents, children, spouses, siblings, grandparents, friends, and others supporting incarcerated Rhode Islanders. Families are often forced to choose between paying for basic necessities, housing, and food, or paying to hear the voices of their incarcerated loved

ones. In fact, one in three families with an incarcerated loved one goes into debt trying to stay connected, and 87% of those bearing this enormous financial burden are women.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, based on our prior work, **we estimate that it would cost the state as little as \$370,000 to provide all those in its custody and their families across Rhode Island with free communication.** Not only is this figure a fraction of what families are currently paying, but they also pale in comparison to what the state spends on its correctional system each year and would return so much more.

The support that families provide their incarcerated loved ones can change how successful a person is both during and after their incarceration. It increases hope, reduces desperation, and encourages positive behavior, which in turn reduces violence and improves the correctional environment for incarcerated people and correctional officers alike. One study showed that verbal and physical assaults decrease by 20% when incarcerated people have regular calls<sup>2</sup> and rule violations decrease by 27% when those calls are with their children.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, incarcerated people who maintain connection with their family, community, and support network during their incarceration have a better chance at successful reentry. With their outside support, they are more likely to secure housing, employment, and access to transition support. This increased success also translates into lower recidivism and increased public safety.<sup>4</sup> One example to support this is in Minnesota, where the DOC reported that the utilization of video calls led to a 20% reduction in recidivism across crimes, including violent offenses.<sup>5</sup>

In closing, providing free prison communication would lift a critical burden off the shoulders of families across the state, while bolstering the financial and emotional wellness of all Rhode Islanders. Free communications will make our communities and correctional facilities safer, while reducing future carceral costs. Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out with questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Alyssa Ackbar  
Policy Campaigns Associate  
[aackbar@worthrises.org](mailto:aackbar@worthrises.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Saneta deVuono-powell, Chris Schweidler, Alicia Walters, and Azadeh Zohrabi. *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*. Oakland, CA: Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design, 2015. <http://whopaysreport.org/who-pays-full-report/>

<sup>2</sup> Solinas-Saunders, Monica, and Melissa J. Stacer. "Prison Resources and Physical/Verbal Assault in Prison: A Comparison of Male and Female Inmates." *Victims & Offenders* 7, no. 3 (July 2012): 279–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2012.685218>.

<sup>3</sup> Jiang, Shanhe, and L. Thomas Winfree. "Social Support, Gender, and Inmate Adjustment to Prison Life: Insights From a National Sample." *The Prison Journal* 86, no. 1 (2006): 32–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885505283876>.

<sup>4</sup> Wong, Leah. "Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families." Prison Policy Initiative, 2021. [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/).

<sup>5</sup> See FN 2.

# CONNECT RHODE ISLAND FAMILIES WITH SB 2233 & HB 7525



Sen. Kallman  
Rep. Felix

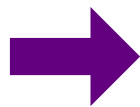
## WHAT WILL SB 2233 AND HB 7525 DO?

- Allow Rhode Island residents to communicate with their incarcerated loved ones in state prisons and youth detention facilities at no cost
- Ensure access by establishing either a minimum 10:1 ratio of incarcerated people to operable phones, with at least two phones indoors
- Prohibits the state from collecting kickbacks from its prison telecom vendor
- Protects in-person visitation

"I haven't called in years now. Families are unnecessarily strapped. We are forced to go into debt just to maintain connection to our family members inside. And we couldn't do it anymore."

— Mother of two whose husband is incarcerated

# \$800k



# \$370k

### Annual spending by families on communication

RIDOC charges \$0.029 per minute to speak with an incarcerated loved one, or \$0.59 for a 20-minute phone call. A 20-minute video call costs \$5.00.

### Annual cost to state of making communication free

Providing free communication in prisons is **cost-effective program that promotes rehabilitation** and becoming increasingly so with innovative models being pioneered across the nation.

## SUPPORT CONNECTING FAMILIES BECAUSE...

- **1 in 3 families with an incarcerated loved one goes into debt** trying to pay predatory prison telecom vendors to maintain contact and 87% of the financial burden is borne by women.
- Every child deserves to hear "I love you" from their parent. Communication **mitigates the trauma suffered by the 1 in 28 children whose parents are incarcerated.**
- Communication with loved ones disrupts the toxicity of prisons and creates hope. When supported, incarcerated people are more committed to their own success and engaged in rehabilitative behaviors, which studies have shown **decreases incidents in facilities and reduces recidivism, making officers and us all safer.**
- **No program is more accessible and effective at improving reentry success** than communication that strengthens relationships between incarcerated people and their support networks.
- The positive social and fiscal benefits associated with communication significantly outweigh its costs.

# VOTE YES ON SB 2233 AND HB 7525!

# RHODE ISLAND FAMILIES ON THE COST OF PRISON COMMUNICATIONS



*"I've recently been working three jobs just to help support myself, my son, and my grandson. Even though sixty dollars doesn't seem like much to some people, it could really help us. Relief from this financial burden would make a big difference." - **Melonie Perez, mother of a currently incarcerated loved one***

*"When you call people, your first reaction is, 'Am I being a financial burden on them by needing to talk to somebody?'. I learned how to budget my feelings. I needed to budget my need for support." - **Steven Parkhurst, a formerly incarcerated loved one***

*"During yard recreation, inmates must endure frigid temperatures, extreme heat, and snow/rain if we wish to make a call. There isn't anything shielding inmates or the phone from inclement weather conditions." - **Kyle Roots, a currently incarcerated loved one***

*"Many of our family members are jobless or don't have the means to provide for us behind the wall. The little that they do make goes to bills, necessities, and debt they created through the lack of assistance." - **Charles Emanuel Porter Pona, a currently incarcerated loved one***

*"Picture what it feels like standing in 10-degree weather, with the wind chill making it feel even colder, for 3 hours just to make three 15-minute calls." - **Frank Sanchez-Collins, a currently incarcerated loved one***

*"As prisoners, our punishment is our lack of freedom. Our loved one did not commit the crimes that got us here, and I do not think it is right that they be punished with the burden of supporting us." - **Xavier Vidot, a currently incarcerated loved one***

*"My mom had no extra money as a fixed income person, just kind of barely scraping by, and I probably talked to her about once every other month for 15 minutes. And to her that was still a costly expense that wasn't really in the cards." - **Bruce Reilly, a formerly incarcerated loved one***

## HELP CONNECT FAMILIES



January 2024

State of Rhode Island General Assembly  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Rhode Island state legislators,

For years, Rhode Island families have had to make unconscionable decisions to afford to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones. Despite years of pleas for help, Rhode Island families continue to have to penny pinch just so a child can hear the soothing sound of their parent's voice for a few minutes. Rhode Island families need our leaders to take a stand — it is long past due.

**We, the undersigned coalition of directly impacted and allied organizations, urge the Rhode Island legislature to pass SB 2233 and HB 7525 to stop charging families for prison communication.**

Every year, Rhode Island families pay the state's private telecom vendor over \$800,000 to talk to their incarcerated loved ones. Many are trapped in a cycle of debt and poverty, and the financial impact disproportionately impacts Black, brown, and low-income communities. In fact, over 50 percent of families with an incarcerated loved one struggle to meet basic housing and food needs.<sup>1</sup> One in three families goes into debt just to stay in touch with a loved one behind bars, and women — largely Black and Brown — carry 87 percent of the burden.<sup>2</sup>

As families continue to struggle to recover from the pandemic and face insurmountable inflation rates while wages remain unchanged, it is now even more urgent that our leaders address the egregious cost of prison communication. Families should not have to resort to skipping meals, utility bills, car notes, or even rent so that a mother can help her child with homework over the phone or a grandmother can ease her grandson out of a psychiatric crisis. The family unit should be cherished, promoted, and protected, not exploited and broken. Families with loved ones behind bars are no exception. It is a moral failure that we must make right.

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<sup>1</sup> Shanahan, Ryan and Sandra Villalobos Agudelo. "The Family and Recidivism." American Jails, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families, Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design (2015), available at <https://ellabakercenter.org/who-pays-the-true-cost-of-incarceration-on-families>.

Moreover, having support from loved ones is an essential human need and the root of all social success. Research has shown repeatedly that when incarcerated people stay connected to their support networks, they do better both while they are behind bars and when they reenter the community, making correctional officers and us all safer. Communication with loved ones substantially decreases incidents in prisons<sup>3</sup> and reduces recidivism upon release.<sup>4</sup> If considered a program, it would be the most cost-effective program to exist and also the only program available to all people behind bars the day they arrive. And the positive impacts are similar for families. Children, for instance, do better at home and at school when they are able to maintain relationships with their parents in prison.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past few years, states and counties across the country have begun making prison and jail communication free in an effort to further rehabilitation, strengthen families, mitigate trauma for children, support correctional staff, improve reentry, and promote public safety. Since 2018, California, Connecticut, Colorado, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Miami, and others have made communication free in their prisons and jails with incredible success. Correctional environments have improved, critical connections have been reestablished, and people are being released with social support. Today, another dozen states are considering similar legislation. Rhode Island must join in passing this smart criminal justice intervention.

This session, we ask you to make our communities safer while also protecting our most marginalized families, those struggling to support their loved ones behind bars who cannot share or hear simple comforting words without threatening their own financial stability. We ask that you act now to remove the financial burden of connecting with an incarcerated loved one by passing SB 2233 and HB 7525.

Sincerely,

Black Lives Matter Rhode Island PAC  
COYOTE RI  
Direct Action for Rights and Equality  
Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty  
Open Doors Rhode Island  
Project Weber/RENEW  
Reentry Campus Program  
Rhode Island Working Families Party  
SUPER PAC  
The American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island  
The Stop Torture RI Coalition  
Worth Rises

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<sup>3</sup> Solinas-Saunders, Monica, and Melissa J. Stacer. "Prison Resources and Physical/Verbal Assault in Prison: A Comparison of Male and Female Inmates." *Victims & Offenders* 7, no. 3 (July 2012): 279–311, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2012.685218>.

<sup>4</sup> Wang, Leah. "Research Roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families," Prison Policy Initiative (2021), available at [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*



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   @worthrises

April 4, 2024

Office of State Senator Meghan Kallman  
93 Capwell Avenue  
Pawtucket, RI 02860

**RE: Fiscal impact of free phone calls for incarcerated people**

Dear Senator Kallman,

We, at Worth Rises, want to applaud you for introducing a bill which would connect families by making prison communication free. We are writing today to provide an expert analysis of the fiscal impact this policy would have on the current budget.

Worth Rises is a non-profit organization working to end the exploitation of incarcerated people and their loved ones. We are a leader in the prison phone justice space at the federal, state, and local level, and have helped pass and implement policies in Connecticut, California, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and Miami to make prison and jail communication free. We have built models based on the data we have gathered from prisons and jails across the country that allow us to support administrators and lawmakers with critical fiscal analyses.

**Based on our analysis, we project that providing fully free communication across Rhode Island state prisons would cost the state as little as \$370,000 annually, while saving Rhode Island families \$800,000.** Below please find our detailed fiscal analysis for this proposed policy, which we hope is helpful to you as you continue to advocate for phone justice for the tens of thousands of Rhode Island residents directly impacted by incarceration. Please feel free to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

Bianca Tylek  
Executive Director

## DATA & ASSUMPTIONS

Our findings are based on the following assumptions:

**Population.** For this analysis, we use the average daily population as of 2022 for Rhode Island facilities, or 2,132 for the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (DOC).

**Current spending.** For this analysis, we use 2022 phone call, video call, and electronic messaging data as provided by the DOC.

**Commissions.** The DOC does not collect revenue from the sale of communications services.

### Phone Calls

- **Cost basis.** Incarcerated people and their loved ones are charged \$0.029 per minute for prison calls. For this analysis, we assume that the DOC would renegotiate rates in line with other progressive states and counties that have prioritized affordability by assuming this cost directly. We also assume that the DOC would be interested in exploring new innovative cost structures for providing communications services.
  - **Option 1 – Per minute.** There are more competitive rates offered by all the leading prison telecom providers. For example, families pay a per minute rate of \$0.009 in Illinois, \$0.010 in New Hampshire, \$0.012 in Dallas, \$0.014 in Colorado, \$0.020 in Ohio and Mississippi, and \$0.025 in California. For this analysis, we assume that if the DOC continues with a per minute compensation structure, it would secure a rate of \$0.01 per minute.
  - **Option 2 – Per phone line.** In recent years, correctional agencies have been exploring new compensation structures to provide communications services that better reflect modern day technology. One of these models was pioneered by the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department and is based on a per phone line basis, whereby the agency pays a monthly fee per phone line. While the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department pays \$89.78 per phone line per month, since it pioneered this model in 2021, new procurement processes have already produced rates as low as \$49 per phone line per month. This model better aligns with the intention to increase communication by separating costs from call volume. For this analysis, we base our estimate on 474 phones across all facilities, a figure provided by the DOC, and a monthly per phone line rate of \$49.
  - **Option 3 – Per person.** Another compensation structure was recently explored by the Connecticut Department of Correction, which negotiated a per person model whereby the agency pays a monthly fee per incarcerated person. The Connecticut Department of Correction pays \$30 per person per month for unlimited international and domestic calling on tablets. We do not recommend this approach at this time as the cost is higher than alternative options, and thus do not include it in this analysis.



- **Call volume.** Our elasticity model accounts for changes in call volume based on changes in rates. We use this model to account for the increase in volume expected when rates fall to zero as the proposed policy would require.
  - **Option 1 – Wall-phones.** Traditionally calling services are provided over wall phones. For this analysis, we use the average per person per day call time from all jurisdictions that have implemented free calling over wall phones to date, or 27.7 minutes.
  - **Option 2 – Tablets.** Individual tablets allow for a far wider use of calling services. For this analysis, we use the average per person per day call time from all jurisdictions that have implemented free calling using tablets to date, or 43.4 minutes. States that have done this include California (where use is 42.0 minutes per person per day) and Connecticut (where use is 43.4 minutes per person per day).

### **Video calls.**

- **Cost basis.** Incarcerated people and their loved ones in Rhode Island are charged \$0.25 per minute for video calls. For this analysis, we assume that DOC would negotiate rates in line with other states and counties that have prioritized affordability by assuming this cost directly. For example, in Montana, families pay \$0.15 per minute for video calls, and in Michigan, families pay \$0.16 per minute. Further, a major industry vendor offered a rate of \$0.10 per minute during negotiations related to video calls in Virginia. Thus, we assume that if the DOC was to continue with a per minute compensation structure and leverage the expected increase in volume, it would secure a rate of \$0.07 per minute.
  - **Alternative video vendors.** In recent years, correctional agencies have been exploring alternative methods of providing video calls that are more cost-efficient and better reflect the state of video calling in the free world. For example, agencies like the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services provide access to free video calls through Zoom and Microsoft Teams. We recommend considering these options for video calling for incarcerated people.
- **Call volume.** According to data provided by the DOC, in 2022, incarcerated people used video calls for about 0.4 minutes per day. In a pilot program in Colorado, when 280 women were given free video calls for one year, they used 15.4 minutes per person per month. Accordingly, for this analysis, we conservatively assume an average of 15.4 minutes per person per month.

### **Electronic Messages**

- **Cost basis.** Incarcerated people and their families are charged \$0.25 per electronic message. For this analysis, we assume that the DOC would renegotiate rates in line with other progressive states and counties that have prioritized affordability and public safety by assuming this cost directly. We also assume that the DOC would be interested in exploring new innovative cost structures for providing communications services.
  - **Option 1 – Per message.** There are more competitive rates offered by all the leading prison telecom providers. For example, in Maine, all families receive 10 monthly electronic messages for free and pay \$0.025 for each additional message. In California, families pay a per message rate of \$0.05 for all message types. For this analysis, we

assume that if the DOC continues with a per message compensation structure, it would secure a rate of \$0.03 per message.

- **Option 2 – Per person.** In recent years, correctional agencies have been exploring new compensation structures to provide communications services that better reflect modern day technology. For example, the Connecticut Department of Corrections negotiated a per person compensation structure to implement unlimited electronic messaging access on tablets. Connecticut pays \$15 per person per month for unlimited electronic messaging on tablets. We do not recommend this approach at this time as the cost is higher than alternative options, and thus do not include it in this analysis.
- **Message volume.** According to data provided by the DOC, in 2022, about 0.8 electronic messages were sent per person per day. We know that when Connecticut made electronic messages free, incarcerated people sent and received on average a total of 5.4 messages per person per day. For this analysis, we assume an average of 5.4 messages per person per day.

## ANALYSIS

### **Making prison communications free would save Rhode Island families at least \$800,000 each year.**

- **Rates.** Today, Rhode Island residents are paying Securus \$0.029 per minute to speak with an incarcerated loved one, or \$0.44 for a 15-minute phone call, and up to \$0.25 per minute for a video call. The proposed policy would make prison communications free for incarcerated people and their families.
- **Service costs.** Rhode Island residents pay the state's prison telecom vendor, Securus, \$620,000 for phone calls to communicate with incarcerated loved ones in prison annually, before taxes and fees.
- **Deposit fees.** Securus also collects additional fees, including an account funding fee of \$3 per transaction (capped at \$50). With a national average deposit of \$17, the account funding fees alone are estimated to cost families an additional \$110,000 annually.
- **Taxes and other fees.** Families also pay an estimated \$60,000 annually in other government fees and taxes, including the Federal Universal Service Fund assessed on interstate calls.

**The fiscal impact of free prison communications on the state budget is estimated to be between \$370,000 and \$500,000 annually.**

- **Commissions.** Rhode Island does not collect commission on prison communications and thus there is no loss of revenue associated with this policy.
- **Phone calls.** The cost of providing free phone calls in Rhode Island prisons would be based on the compensation structure as follows:
  - \$280,000 for a per phone line compensation model, or
  - \$220,000 for a per minute wall-phone compensation model.
- **Video Calls.** The cost of providing free video calls in Rhode Island prisons would be \$30,000 for a per minute compensation model.
- **Electronic messaging.** The cost of providing free electronic messaging in Minnesota prisons would be \$130,000 for a per message compensation model.