



**Testimony in support of a budget appropriation to provide free communication for people incarcerated in Michigan prisons and their support networks**

*February 23, 2022*

Dear Chair Bradley Slagh, Vice-Chair Sarah Lightner, and the House Committee on Appropriations – Subcommittee on Corrections,

My name is Bianca Tylek, and I am the Executive Director of Worth Rises, a national non-profit dedicated to ending the exploitation of people impacted by incarceration. I submit this testimony in support of a budget appropriation to make prison communication free, along with a letter from the Connecting Families coalition, an issue fact sheet, and impact stories from Michiganders.

Thank you for taking the time to hear from the public on Wednesday, February 23, 2022 on the cost of prison communications and its impact. I hope you will take particular note of the powerful stories of people who have been directly impacted by incarceration and how the exorbitant cost of prison communication has weighed on their lives. I will focus my testimony, instead, on the policy arguments and fiscal considerations that support this budget appropriation.

Worth Rises has helped jurisdictions across the country move toward providing free communications for incarcerated people and their support networks. We led the first successful state campaign in Connecticut as well as successful local campaigns in New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, and Louisville. And we are currently supporting similar campaigns in over a dozen state and local jurisdictions. Accordingly, we know what it takes to implement this policy and are committed to helping Michigan do so.

With this appropriation, Michigan has the opportunity to join others on the forefront of this national movement to provide overdue relief to millions of families with incarcerated loved ones by simply making communication free.

Today, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) charges \$0.14 per minute for phone calls out of state prisons. As a result, **Michigan families pay the state's prison telecom vendor, Global Tel Link (GTL), an estimated \$28.0 million each year to speak to their**

**incarcerated loved ones.** From that, the MDOC gets \$11.0 million each year for its Programming and Special Equipment Fund, which it can spend on “programming, special equipment, and security projects” (Michigan Legislature, September 2020). According to a report by Public Sector Consultants for Safe & Just Michigan, as of the end of FY 2021, the fund had a balance of \$6.3 million and is expected to grow.<sup>1</sup>

This money comes directly from the parents, children, spouses, siblings, grandparents, friends, and others in the support networks of incarcerated Michiganders. Families are often forced to choose between necessities like bills, groceries, and hearing the voice 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>2</sup>

By contrast, based on our prior work, **we estimate that it would cost the state less than \$4.3 million to provide the 32,300 people currently incarcerated in its facilities and their families across Michigan with free prison communication.** We base our estimate on known rates around the country that start at \$0.009 per minute (in Illinois) and the expected average daily use per person, drawn from proprietary models, of 30.5 minutes. Note though that there are also new compensation models in the industry that could further lower the cost.

The cost of providing free prison communication pales in comparison to what the state spends on its correctional system each year and would return so much more. Studies have consistently shown that communication between incarcerated people and their support networks increases hope inside, strengthens families, mitigates trauma for children facing parental incarceration, and improves reentry success.<sup>3</sup>

In closing, providing free prison communication would lift a critical burden off the shoulders of Michigan families across the state and help bolster the financial and emotional wellness of all Michiganders, especially those who are most marginalized. Thank you for your consideration, and please do not hesitate to reach out with questions at [btylek@worthrises.org](mailto:btylek@worthrises.org).

Thank you,



Bianca Tylek  
Executive Director  
Worth Rises

---

<sup>1</sup> *Criminal Justice Budget and Funding Opportunity Analysis*. Public Sector Consultants, 2021.; See also, *Program and Special Equipment Fund Revenues and Expenditures*. Michigan Department of Corrections. [https://www.michigan.gov/corrections/0,4551,7-119-1441\\_1513-519821--,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/corrections/0,4551,7-119-1441_1513-519821--,00.html)

<sup>2</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>3</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/)



July 2021

**Anderson House Office Building**

124 North Capitol Avenue  
Lansing, MI 48933

**Capitol Building**

100 N. Capitol Ave  
Lansing, MI 4893

Dear Michigan state legislators,

For years, Michigan families have paid unconscionable rates to stay connected with incarcerated loved ones. But in the last year, amid a global health crisis and the ensuing economic fallout, Michigan continues to rank in the bottom in the country in the affordability of prison phone calls. Despite years of pleas for help, a call from a Michigan jail can still run as much as \$16 for 15 minutes<sup>1</sup> — the highest rate in the nation. Michigan families need our leaders to take a stand — it is long past due.

**We, the undersigned coalition of directly impacted and allied groups and organizations, urge the Michigan legislature to support legislation that stops charging families for prison communication.**

Every year, Michigan families spend tens of millions to talk to their incarcerated loved ones, lining the pockets of the state, counties, and its private telecom providers: Global Tel-Link, Securus, and Inmate Calling Solutions. Unsurprisingly, prior to the pandemic, nearly one in three went into debt trying to stay connected, and women — largely Black and Brown women — carried 87 percent of the burden.<sup>2</sup>

COVID-19 shined an even brighter light on this travesty as visits were suspended and families facing job loss, unexpected childcare, and health concerns struggled to stay connected to loved ones behind bars. After the past 18 months, these statistics are undeniably worse today. Now is the time for our leaders to address the egregious cost of prison phone calls because families should not have to resort to skipping meals or utility bills so a child can hear the soothing sound of their parent's voice. It is a moral failure that we must make right.

Moreover, 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Worth Rises national rate analysis (Dec 2020).

<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>.

community. And families do better too. Children, for instance, do better at home and at school when they are able to maintain relationships with their parents in prison.

We ask that you act now to protect Michigan families by removing the financial burden of connecting with incarcerated loved ones now and forever. Michigan has been separating families with some of the worst calling rates in the country for far too long. The family unit should be cherished, promoted, and protected, not exploited and broken. Families with loved ones behind bars are no exception. They matter too.

Sincerely,

American Friends Service Committee  
Citizens for Prison Reform  
Detroit Justice Center  
Michigan Center for Youth Justice  
Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration  
Michigan CURE  
Michigan Justice Advocacy  
Michigan Liberation  
Nation Outside  
National Center for Youth Law  
Power in Passion, LLC  
Project Unity for Life  
Safe & Just Michigan  
Worth Rises

# VOTE TO CONNECT MICHIGAN FAMILIES



## WHAT WILL CONNECTING FAMILIES LEGISLATION DO?

- Allows Michigan residents to communicate with their incarcerated loved ones at no cost
- Prohibits the state from taking kickbacks from its prison telecom vendor
- Ensure reasonable access to communication services in correctional facilities
- Protects in-person visits for Michigan residents with incarcerated loved ones



**It makes me feel horrible when I can't afford to answer a call, like I'm abandoning my family. — Juan Martin Trevino Jr.**

**\$28.0M** → **\$4.3M**

### Annual spending by families on prison calls

MDOC charges \$0.14 per minute and collects \$11 million commissions on calls. County jails across the state charge as much as \$1.10 per minute and collect millions more.

### Annual cost of providing prison calls for free

Providing free communication in prisons and jails is very cost-effective 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 maintain contact while enriching predatory correctional telecom corporations and their government partners.
- Shifting the cost of core state functions onto families, particularly low-income women of color, misrepresents state priorities and is **ineffective, unsustainable, and unethical**.
- Every child deserves to hear “I love you” from their parent. Communication is critical to reducing the trauma suffered by the **1 in 28 children** whose parents are incarcerated.
- Communication with loved ones outside interrupts the toxicity inside prisons. When people are supported, they become committed to their own success and engage in rehabilitative practices.
- **No program is more 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.



# MICHIGAN FAMILIES ON THE COST OF PRISON CALLS

*"It makes me feel horrible when I can't afford to answer a call, like I'm abandoning my family."*  
- **Juan Martin Trevino Jr.**

*"He can only call when they are allowed to go out in the yard. It is -9° this morning so I doubt I will hear from him today. We have to pay over \$3.00 for 15 minutes to have our son stand in the freezing cold to stay connected with us."* - **Margaret Smith**

*"As a widow and a single income household for many years the impact of the cost of phone calls from my son had made me delay my retirement by several years. I needed to make sure I was able to have money in my budget to continue receiving his calls which averages \$80 a month then also the cost of video visits on top of the regular phone calls. I need to be able to have contact with him since I am his court appointed legal guardian. Between the phone calls, video visits and money to place in his account I spend over \$200 a month for him being incarcerated."*  
- **Mora Wilkevicz**

*"It is incredibly disheartening to have to decide whether or not I can afford for my 2 year old to talk to her dad more than once or twice a week."* - **Raeanne Leach**

*"Paying for calls means I have to turn my heat down to 62 and I keep as many things as I can unplugged to conserve. I am 66 and retired. I try to go to food banks to save money."*  
- **Cindy Chesla**

*"You want another call but you know the money is not there. And sometimes you're choosing between that call and feeding yourself or your loved one inside."* - **Jamie Gonzalez**

*"There have been times when we had to limit calls. Last spring I was off work for a month. Income was limited, and my husband was so worried about me but didn't want to burden me with paying for calls. It was a really hard time emotionally for both of us."* - **Alicia Bowers**

## HELP CONNECT FAMILIES