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Costly Prison Phone Call Fees Block Families From Connecting to Incarcerated Loved Ones

Position Statement in Support of Senate Bill 948

Given before the Judicial Proceedings Committee

The cost of living for people who are incarcerated in Maryland includes, but isn't limited to, the cost of phone calls and commissary products, such as medication and hygiene products. These costs can be unaffordable for low-income families trying to stay connected to and support a loved one while they are behind bars. **The Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports Senate Bill 948 because allowing low-cost communication between incarcerated Marylanders and their families can further rehabilitation and increase economic security.**

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, prison phone call fees in Maryland are \$0.48 for a 15-minute callⁱ. Research shows that prison phone calls, between family members or medical providers, are often priced at excessive ratesⁱⁱ. In addition, substandard wages for inmates, varying between \$0.17 and \$1.16 hourly, make it difficult for them to afford these costs on their own. This in turn increases the burden on their families, who often foot these exorbitant bills.ⁱⁱⁱ These fees, which are effectively a regressive tax, should not be levied on Maryland's low-income families. At the same time, these fees are not effective at generating revenue for the state as most incarcerated individuals have little ability to pay^{iv}.

Being able to make phone calls while incarcerated benefits everyone. One study found 83 percent of the interviewed children of incarcerated parents reported improved education outcomes by staying in contact with their incarcerated parent.^v They also reported success in their personal and professional lives as a result of their positive relationship with their incarcerated parent.

Repealing these fees not only allows for more consistent communication between families but saves them from going into debt to stay in touch with their loved ones. **For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the Judicial Proceedings Committee make favorable report on Senate Bill 948.**

Equity Impact Analysis: Senate Bill 948

Bill summary

Senate Bill 948 will prevent a state correctional facility and a telephone service provider from charging an incarcerated individual or a third party, including the recipient of a telephone call, for an incarcerated individual's use of telephone equipment or telephone services in a state correctional facility. It also states a State correctional facility is responsible for the payment of any cost charged by a telephone service provider for such equipment and services.

Background

Prison phone call fees can be unaffordable for low-income families trying to keep in touch with incarcerated loved ones. The average rate in Maryland in 2021 was \$0.48 for a 15-minute call.

Equity Implications

High-cost telecommunication particularly impacts Black Marylanders, who make up more than 70% of the state's prison population – twice their representation in Maryland's overall population^{vi}.

- Total direct pre-paid and collect calls (fees paid both by incarcerated Marylanders or their family) amount to \$9.6 million in FY23^{vii}. These are funds paid for by individuals and families who are low-income and often result in going into debt.

Impact

Senate Bill 948 would likely **impact racial and economic equity** in Maryland.

ⁱ https://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/appendices2022_1.html

ⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/01/1146370950/prison-phone-call-cost-martha-wright-biden>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.mdeconomy.org/budgeting-for-opportunity-justice/>

^{iv} <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/americas-dystopian-incarceration-system-pay-stay-behind-bars>

^v <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61bc00634061a13526f653c/t/61cd187f2ea59e4d19ce66d6/1640831107402/Children+of+Incarcerated+Parents+Pathways+to+Resilience+%26+Success+Research+Report+2021.pdf>

^{vi} <https://dpscs.maryland.gov/publicinfo/publications/pdfs/Inmate%20Characteristics%20Report%20FY%202022%20Q4.pdf>

^{vii} https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2024RS/fnotes/bil_0008/sbo948.pdf