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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 0948:

State Correctional Facilities - Incarcerated Individuals - Costs of Telephone Communications

TO: Hon. Will Smith, and members of the Senate Judicial Proceeding Committee

FROM: Priya Sarathy Jones, Deputy Executive Director, Fines and Fees Justice Center

DATE: Monday, March 4, 2024

The Fines and Fees Justice Center (FFJC) thanks the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee for scheduling this important hearing and **urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 0948. This bill would prohibit 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.**

Communication between those incarcerated and their friends and families is extremely important. The costs of phone calls are burdensome to those incarcerated, while the benefits of communication between incarcerated individuals and their families extend beyond just the individuals. JOTF requested that FFJC provide testimony on SB0948, and **we urge the Committee to pass SB0948.** This would have a meaningful and direct impact on the residents of the state of Maryland. More importantly, this is the best way to move towards evidence-based policies that reduce recidivism, increase successful reentry, and make incarceration safer for all.

Fines and Fees Justice Center

The Fines and Fees Justice Center is a national hub for information, advocacy, and collaboration for the reform of fines and fees. Our mission is to eliminate fees in the justice system, ensure that fines are equitably imposed, and end abusive collection practices. Fines and fees in the justice system hurt millions of Americans – entrenching poverty, exacerbating racial disparities, diminishing trust in our courts and police, and trapping people in perpetual cycles of punishment. FFJC convenes the bipartisan [End Justice Fees coalition](#), along with Americans for Prosperity

and the ACLU, which supports the elimination of fees, like those charged for communications in jails and prisons.¹

Benefits of Phone Calls in Prisons and Jails:

The minimum wage for unskilled positions with Maryland Correctional Enterprises is \$2.16 per day, meaning a 30-minute in-state call can cost almost double the daily earnings of an incarcerated individual.² Many [studies](#) have shown that regular phone calls and visitation with families and incarcerated individuals lead to reduced recidivism and increased rehabilitation post-release. For parents who are incarcerated, calling and receiving calls from their children is particularly impactful, as they are less likely to experience rule violations when they can engage in these calls. When San Francisco, California made jail phone calls free, the sheriff's office reported that the change in communications had a positive impact on everyone, including creating a calming effect in the jails themselves.

[As the Urban Institute has reported:](#)

- **Benefits for children of incarcerated parents.** Positive parent-child connections help with [mental and physical development in children](#) and support their learning as adolescents. One study found that 83 percent of the interviewed children of incarcerated parents [reported staying in contact with their incarcerated parent](#) (PDF) (56 percent by phone calls and videos). They reported success in their personal and professional lives as a result of their positive relationship with their incarcerated parent.
- **Benefits for incarcerated family members.** Frequent calls [promote parent-child relationships](#), resulting in parents expressing better [self-esteem as active parents and displaying better behavior while in prison](#). Consistent phone calls with family members have also been shown to [reduce anxiety and depression among incarcerated people](#).
- **Benefits for correctional institutions and society.** Within the first five years of release, incarcerated people with strong family connections are [25 percent more likely to cease criminal activity](#), helping to reduce jail populations and ease the burden on correctional staff.

Economic Harms:

Most incarcerated people and their families are low-income. Taking money out of the pockets of lower-income families and individuals takes the dollar out of circulation where consumer spending is the biggest driver for a local economy. The costs of these phone calls force incarcerated people and their families to choose between paying for necessities or staying connected. The financial impact of this choice is felt most acutely by economically distressed communities and communities of color. **According to the Federal Reserve, one-third of Americans with a family income less than \$25,000 per year are unable to pay off their monthly bills, even without unexpected emergencies.**³ Adding the burden of paying to be able to communicate with incarcerated loved ones only adds to the stress and financial burdens

¹ More information available at www.endjusticefees.org.

² https://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/appendices2022_5.html

³ Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2022 - May 2023, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2023-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2022-expenses.htm>

of families in Maryland. Making phone calls free would immediately keep critical, life-sustaining dollars in the pockets of Maryland families who are already struggling financially and stop the accumulation of any further debt or sacrifices due to the cost of these calls.

Maryland SB0948

Passage of SB09488 would be a positive move toward ending harmful fees in Maryland. While many states still charge for phone calls, a growing number of states do not. Recognizing the benefits of free phone calls and communications, states are ending these practices, creating better opportunities for those reentering to succeed. In recent years California, Minnesota, Connecticut, Colorado, and Massachusetts have made phone calls free as well as more local jurisdictions across the country.

Conclusion

Maryland's pursuit make phone calls free is a meaningful step towards evidence-based practices that create meaningful changes in our criminal legal system.

The Fines and Fees Justice Center will continue to work for a more just and equitable system. We know this Committee will, too. We look forward to doing it together.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. **We respectfully urge a favorable report on SB948.**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Priya Sarathy Jones', written in a cursive style.

Priya Sarathy Jones
Deputy Executive Director
Fines and Fees Justice Center