

Last year our son was arrested and detained pretrial for behavior that was caused by severe mental illness. Our experience during his intake and incarceration convinced us that communication between incarcerated people and their friends and family is very important for the mental health of the incarcerated individual. Furthermore, the harm caused by lack of communication decreases the chance that the incarcerated person, when released, will resume life as a productive citizen. Although the details of our son's case are unusual, I believe that the difficulties communicating with family and the potential consequences of failure to do so are faced by many incarcerated people. We therefore strongly urge you to act to make phone calls from jails and prisons free and readily available.

Last February, our son was arrested by Montgomery County police on a warrant issued by the State of Florida. He was held in Maryland for several weeks pending extradition. His actions that led to the warrant were not crimes in Maryland, caused no harm, and were the result of mental illness. After his arrest he was taken to the Seven Locks facility. He was permitted to call us to inform us of his arrest. He was then transferred to Clarksburg. We were informed of his transfer, but he was not permitted to call us from Clarksburg; incarcerated people cannot initiate phone calls until an account is set up with ICS, the phone service provider.

To talk to our son, we first had to locate him. We first had to find the jail phone number on the internet. When we called it, no one answered, even during business hours, and the messages we left were not returned. It took us two days before we finally reached someone who was able to locate him and tell us how to set up an account that would permit him to call us. He also had to be informed that the account was set up and told how to use it. He had to initiate all contact; incarcerated people cannot accept incoming calls.

The jail's website states that incarcerated people can make collect calls. This is not true, and the process of funding the prepaid phone account through ICS is extremely difficult and opaque. The caller must go through layers of automated messages that are hard to follow. Human operators are supposedly available, but we were never able to connect to one. To fund an account one has to use a credit or debit card, which many poor people do not have.

We are fairly well off and could afford the expensive prepaid phone plan for our son. Many incarcerated people are not so fortunate; when our son was finally able to call us, he told us that many of the incarcerated people he met are not able to call their families because they lack the resources to set up a phone account. We made multiple calls on behalf of our son's cell mate, who could not otherwise reach his own family. This situation is not uncommon.

Our son was incarcerated during a period of severe mental illness. While in jail he received no medical or psychiatric treatment of any kind. He was under a lot of stress, and during our calls he frequently broke down and cried. His condition would have become much worse if he had not been able to get the emotional support our daily phone conversations provided. Many incarcerated people cannot get such support because of the expense and difficulty of making phone calls.

Although our son was held in the Montgomery county jails, many of the issues we faced also apply to people held in Maryland prisons. We believe that phone calls should be free and easily available for all people incarcerated in Maryland. Since jails are run by the counties, a law mandating free phone service in jails is beset with administrative hurdles. Providing the service to people held in Maryland prisons, as SB948 would do, is much more straightforward and is a necessary first step. Please make a difference in the lives of incarcerated people and their families by passing SB948.