



Lucy Zhou, Attorney
Public Justice Center
201 North Charles Street, Suite 1200
Baltimore, Maryland 21201
410-625-9409, ext. 245
zhoul@publicjustice.org

SB 948: State Correctional Facilities – Incarcerated Individuals – Costs of Telephone Communications

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Position: Favorable

The Public Justice Center (“PJC”) is a not-for-profit civil rights and anti-poverty legal services organization that seeks to advance social justice, economic and racial equity, and fundamental human rights in Maryland. The PJC envisions a just society where Black, Latine, Indigenous, Asian, and other historically exploited people are free from systems of oppression, exploitation, and all expressions of discrimination. The PJC **supports SB 948**, which would make telephone communications free for individuals incarcerated in State correctional facilities.

Currently, in State-run facilities across Maryland, incarcerated people are charged 45 cents for a 15-minute phone call.¹ These costs can add up quickly and make phone calls unaffordable, especially because incarcerated people who work may earn only as little as 17 cents per hour.² When incarcerated individuals cannot afford telephone calls, they are often forced to rely on their families and loved ones to shoulder these costs.

These costs, moreover, are not borne equitably. Because the criminal legal system disproportionately targets communities of color, these communities bear the brunt of these costs, and Black and Latina women in particular pay for 87% of the cost associated with connecting with their incarcerated loved ones.³

The benefits to making telephone communications free and accessible for incarcerated Marylanders are significant, including:

- **Reducing the likelihood of recidivism:** Communication with loved ones on the outside strengthens relationships and social support networks, better ensuring that incarcerated people can successfully reenter their communities upon release. Studies show that incarcerated

¹ Prison & Jail Telecom Data, Worth Rises (2022), <https://connectfamiliesnow.com/data>.

² Alison Knezevich, “Thousands of Maryland inmates work in prison. A new law shows us how much they’re paid.” Baltimore Sun (Jan. 2, 2020), <https://www.baltimoresun.com/2020/01/02/thousands-of-maryland-inmates-work-in-prison-a-new-law-shows-us-how-much-theyre-paid/>.

³ *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*, Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design (2015), <https://ellabakercenter.org/who-pays-the-true-cost-of-incarceration-on-families>.

individuals who have more consistent communication with loved ones were less likely to be reincarcerated within the 5 years after their release.⁴

- **Improving mental health and well-being of incarcerated people:** Consistent contact with family members and loved ones has also been shown to reduce anxiety and depression among incarcerated people.⁵ The rate of violent incidents in prisons also declines, making the carceral environment less dangerous for incarcerated individuals and correctional staff alike.⁶
- **Improving parent-child relationships:** Consistent contact with their incarcerated parents improves outcomes for children as well, with frequent telephone contact associated with greater relationship quality.⁷

Indeed, because the benefits to incarcerated individuals, their families, and society are manifold, the PJC supports expanding the bill to apply to other forms of communications—such as video communications and e-messaging.

In passing such legislation, Maryland would join a growing movement around the country. Since 2021, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Minnesota have passed legislation making prison and jail communications free, recognizing the importance of this economic, racial, gender, and criminal justice issue.

For the foregoing reasons, the PJC **SUPPORTS SB 948** and urges a **FAVORABLE** report. Should you have any questions, please call Lucy Zhou at 410-625-9409 ext. 245.

⁴ Johanna B. Folk, et al., *Behind Bars but Connected to Family: Evidence for the Benefits of Family Contact During Incarceration*, J. Fam. Psychol. (Jun. 2019), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6625803/>.

⁵ Karen De Claire et al., *The Effects of Prison Visits from Family Members on Prisoners' Well-Being, Prison Rule Breaking, and Recidivism: A Review of Research Since 1991*, Trauma, Violence, & Abuse (June 2016), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1524838015603209>.

⁶ Ann Marie Rocheleau, *Ways of Coping and Involvement in Prison Violence*, Int'l J. Offender Therapy & Comp. Criminol. (Nov. 2013), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0306624X13510275?journalCode=ijoe>.

⁷ Danielle L. Haverkate et al., *The Differential Effects of Prison Contact on Parent-Child Relationship Quality and Child Behavioral Changes*, Corrections: Policy, Practice, & Research (2020), https://static.prisonpolicy.org/scans/Haverkate_Wright_2020.pdf.