



January 9th, 2024

Maryland General Assembly  
90 State Circle  
Annapolis, MD 21401

**Re: The Connecting Families Coalition urges the Maryland legislature to make prison and jail communications free in the 2024 legislative session.**

Dear Maryland General Assembly members,

Recent data has shown what is glaringly obvious to incarcerated people and their families — consistent family contact positively impacts the health and wellness of incarcerated people, their families, and safety more broadly.<sup>1</sup> Free prison and jail communications reduces recidivism rates, improves parent-child relationships, improves mental and emotional health outcomes, and more.

Yet, in Maryland, incarcerated people are currently charged 45 cents for a 15-minute phone call at state-run facilities or up to \$3.15 at some local facilities.<sup>2</sup> If they are working, incarcerated people can make as little as 30 cents an hour. This means that often families must shoulder the burden of paying for communication, and many are forced to go into debt or cut ties altogether when they can no longer bear it.

We write to you as the **Connecting Families Coalition of Maryland**, a coalition of local, state, and national advocacy organizations, along with concerned and directly impacted community members, urge the Maryland General Assembly to make prison and jail communications free during the 2024 legislative session. We ask you as our representatives to take a stand and end the exploitation of the basic needs of families to stay connected.

For years, thousands of Maryland families have struggled to afford to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones without being trapped in a cycle of debt and poverty. In fact, about 65 percent of families with an incarcerated loved one struggle to meet basic housing and food needs.<sup>3</sup> One in three families goes into debt just to stay in touch with a loved one behind bars, and women — largely Black and brown women — carry 87 percent of the burden.<sup>4</sup> **Families should not have to choose between paying for meals, utility bills, car notes, or rent and paying for a phone call to their loved one.**

Moreover, having support from loved ones is an essential human need and vital for social success. When

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<sup>1</sup> Leah Wang. “Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families,” Prison Policy Initiatives (2021), [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/)

<sup>2</sup> “Prison & Jail Telecom Data,” Worth Rises (2022), <https://connectfamiliesnow.com/data>

<sup>3</sup> *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>

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

incarcerated people stay connected to their support networks, they are able to play an active role in their own rehabilitation. They are also better able to plan for release, increasing their likelihood of reentering successfully and enhancing public safety.<sup>5</sup> The positive impacts are similar for families: Children do better at home and at school when they are able to maintain relationships with their parents in prison.<sup>6</sup>

Since 2021, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Minnesota have passed legislation making prison and jail communications free. Many major counties and cities have done the same in their jails, including Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, San Diego, and San Francisco. As a result, correctional environments have improved, critical familial and social connections have been reestablished and strengthened, and people are being released with strong social and emotional support systems. Today, another dozen states are considering similar policies for the 2024 legislative cycle. **Maryland’s legislators must prioritize this important family, economic, racial, gender, and criminal justice intervention, which would promote public safety, strengthen communities, and provide relief for thousands of incarcerated people and families in the state.**

We ask you to make our communities safer while also protecting some of Maryland’s most marginalized families. Those struggling to support their loved ones behind bars, who cannot share or hear comforting words without threatening their own financial stability, deserve your action and commitment to this policy. We urge you to stand with our coalition in the 2024 legislative session by supporting and advancing legislation that removes the financial burden of communications with an incarcerated loved one in Maryland.

Sincerely,

ACLU of MD  
Center for Criminal Justice Reform, University of Baltimore School of Law  
Civil Rights Corps  
Fines and Fees Justice Center  
Interfaith Action for Human Rights  
Job Opportunities Task Force  
Life After Release  
Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform  
Maryland Office of the Public Defender  
Maryland Reentry Resource Center  
Public Justice Center  
United Church of Christ Media Justice Ministry  
Worth Rises

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<sup>5</sup> Leah Wang. “Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families,” Prison Policy Initiatives (2021), [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/)

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*