

My name is Qiana Johnson, and I am the Executive Director of Life After Release. Today, I want to speak to you about an issue that is deeply personal to me and families across this state - the impact of incarceration on families, particularly children.

Having experienced incarceration myself, I understand firsthand the importance of maintaining connections with loved ones behind bars. During my three-year incarceration, my two sons were still in school. For me, as a mother, it was crucial to stay in communication with them despite the barriers of incarceration.

Research underscores the profound trauma experienced by children who are separated from their incarcerated parents. It's a trauma that often goes unexpressed, but it lingers, affecting their emotional and psychological well-being. Shockingly, statistics reveal that Black children are six times more likely to have an incarcerated parent, amplifying the disparities and injustices within our criminal legal system.

But staying connected comes with a price tag - a price that many families simply cannot afford. Legal fees, fines, prison visits, commissary expenses, and perhaps one of the highest costs, the cost of phone calls and video calls from jail. These financial burdens only serve to deepen the divide between incarcerated individuals and their families, adding on to the already significant challenges they face.

That's why I stand here today to urge the Judiciary Committee and the Maryland General Assembly to support legislation like HB1366. This bill, if passed, would eliminate the cost of jail phone calls, a crucial step in reconnecting families torn apart by incarceration.

Let's imagine the impact of this legislation - children being able to hear their parents' voices without the barrier of financial strain, mothers being able to comfort their babies with a simple phone call, families being able to maintain a bit of normalcy amidst the trauma of incarceration.

The time for change is now. We cannot continue to allow financial barriers to dictate the strength of familial bonds. We cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of children with incarcerated parents. It is our duty, as legislators, as mothers, as organizers, as human beings, to take action.

So, I implore you, vote to advance HB1366. Stand with us in ensuring that no family is left behind, that no child suffers in silence, and that the bonds of love and support transcend the confines of prison walls.

Free Them All, Peace