



March 5, 2024

BILL: HB1366: State Correctional Facilities - Incarcerated Individuals - Costs of Telephone Communications

POSITION: Favorable

Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

I am a resident of MD Legislative District 40 and a Litigation Support Fellow at Civil Right Corps, writing to respectfully request that the Committee issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 0948/ House Bill 1366.

Civil Rights Corps is a non-profit organization dedicated to challenging systemic injustice in the United States' legal system. While our office is based in Washington, D.C., we bring cases related to the legal system and the criminalization of poverty, in Maryland and beyond.

When a person is incarcerated, they are not just removed from communities of care—their loved ones, “hidden victims” who depend upon them, are also disconnected and punished. Children are left without a parent to pick them up from school, help with homework, or provide knowing counsel. Families lose an often critical source of income and material support. Studies show that incarceration “disrupts parent-child relationships, alters the networks of familial support, and places new burdens on governmental services such as schools, foster care, adoption agencies, and youth-serving organizations.”¹

We ask that the Committee lift **one burden** off the backs of Maryland families impacted by incarceration and make all communication services free for Marylanders in prison.

An investment in free communications now is an investment in Maryland's future and will save taxpayer dollars down the line.

While the cost of making calls in prison may seem feasible to you or I, 65% of families with an incarcerated loved one struggle to meet basic housing and food needs, and one

¹ Travis, Jeremy, Cincotta McBride, Elizabeth, and Soloman, Amy L. *Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry*, Urban Institute Justice Policy Center (2003), <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/50461/310882-Families-Left-Behind.PDF>

in three families go into debt simply attempting to stay in contact with their family member inside.²

When people in prison have frequent contact with their loved ones, they remain healthier behind bars, better maintain familial relationships, and have greater medical and mental health outcomes once released.³ I've seen this firsthand—in working with people in prison in Maryland and New York—phones are a lifeline that keep people connected to who they were outside and who they want to be once released. Astoundingly, consistent phone calls greatly lower the chance that someone will return to prison in the future.⁴

In the long term, making communications free will result in less Maryland residents behind bars and less state resources needed to keep people in cages. This means we can focus on generative policies that keep our communities safe—like robust support for mental health care and substance abuse users, fully-funded schools, and a clean environment.

We ask that Maryland follow the lead of California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Minnesota and pass HB1366 making prison communications free.

For more information, please contact: Cassidy Kristal-Cohen, Litigation Support Fellow, cassidy@civilrightscorps.org

² *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>

³ Wang, Leah. *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/

⁴ *Id.*