



## **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 56**

### **State Correctional Facilities - Incarcerated Individuals - Costs of Telephone Communications**

TO: Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Elizabeth Starnes

DATE: January 8th, 2025

**I, Elizabeth Starnes,** support Senate Bill 56 to provide that a State correctional facility is responsible for the payment of costs charged by a telephone service provider under certain circumstances, providing that a State correctional facility and a telephone service provider may not charge an incarcerated individual or a third party under certain circumstances; providing that an incarcerated individual's access to or use of telephone equipment and telephone services may not supplant time that the incarcerated individual is entitled to in-person visitation; and generally relating to the payment of costs for telephone equipment and telephone services used by incarcerated individuals in State correctional facilities.

I was incarcerated for 12 years, and I am coming on 5 years of being free. I have had absolutely no run-ins with police since my release, have had no violations of parole, and have done my due diligence in society. Despite serving my time and wanting to return to everyday life, I have faced immense struggles in reentry. A significant barrier to becoming a returning citizen for me has been the connections I lost during incarceration due to being unable to speak to my family members regularly.

I do not come from a wealthy family. While I was incarcerated, phone calls were \$00.85 for a 15-minute conversation, and until I got a job, the burden to pay for all of my calls was on them. Our insufficient income meant that I could not afford to speak to my young son regularly. Instead, I had to "ration out" phone calls, choosing between hygiene products for the month and wishing my son a happy birthday. Once, there was even an incident where my child received severe burns, and I was unable to speak to him because I was short of the \$00.85 needed to call. This extreme and unfortunate "budgeting" I was forced into was constantly mentally draining. I



didn't want being incarcerated to be the reason why I couldn't be a mother, a daughter, or a sister.

In 2018, I was left just 24 cents short of a decision no mother should have to make: a call to my son or seeing him in person at Family Day, an annual event that cost far more than my limited funds could cover. Instead, my savings for the visit were taken to cover phone fees, making me choose isolation over connection. My son, angry and hurt, shared our story publicly, which led to my being called into the office and warned that I could be placed in segregation—a punishment that would have cost me access to a work-release program and left me homeless upon release. I refused to silence my son, even as myself and 17 other women were barred from Family Day. Stripped of the chance to see my family, I was made to stand in an auditorium as security chief and humiliated in front of the others. For a month, that 24 cents cut me off from contact with my loved ones, forcing me to endure a silence that deepened the distance between us.

To this day, I feel the toll of the strained relationships with my family. Because I could barely afford calls, I only kept in touch with my mom and son, while my sisters, nieces, and extended family became distant memories. Coming home felt like stepping into a house of strangers, with bonds broken and support networks frayed. While tablets now offer limited weekend calls, the cost still bars many from even this small connection to their families. Successful reentry is impossible without people to return to; without family or friends left for support, many are set up for failure. I live with this reality every day, haunted by the relationships lost simply because I couldn't afford to hold on to them.

We urge a favorable report on SENATE BILL 56 for these reasons and more.

Thank you, Elizabeth Starnes