

## Testimony in Support of SB 56

### State Correctional Facilities- Incarcerated Individuals – Cost of Telephone Communications

TO: Hon. Will C. Smith, Chair, and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Aubrey Edwards-Luce, Esq., MSW on Behalf of the Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts at the University of Baltimore School of Law

DATE: January 7, 2025

Chair Smith, Vice-Chair Waldstreicher and Esteemed Members of the Committee,

**The Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) supports Senate Bill 56, which would shift the cost of telephone calls from incarcerated individuals and their families to the state starting in July 2026 for FY 27. It would also establish an advisory committee to review and study the experience in other states that have made this policy change at a much lower cost per minute and lower overall cost in conjunction with the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) and other stakeholders.**

The incarceration of a family member is an adverse childhood experience that can increase children's likelihood of facing harmful emotional, physical, social, legal and educational outcomes. Removing financial barriers to family communication during incarceration can help children have [positive childhood experiences \(PCEs\) that can foster resilience](#). Social belonging and supportive relationships are PCEs that can help children build resilience in the face of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Supporting communication between the children of incarcerated adults and their parents is an important step to promoting positive outcomes for Maryland's children and youth.

As a national leader in the movement for family integrity, CFCC advocates for policies that help families stay safe and together. Our experience and expertise in child welfare, youth justice and education direct us to conclude that SB56 is a smart step towards [supporting positive outcomes for incarcerated parents and their children](#). It is estimated that [15 to 20% of children in foster care have an incarcerated parent](#). Whether those children are preparing to reunify with their parents upon their release or preparing to exit foster care with kin or a foster caregiver, I have seen how being able to talk to their parents about the next steps has helped children in foster care, their parents, and their caregivers move forward with lessened anxiety. This cost savings of this benefit should be studied and taken into account.

While parental incarceration is less common in the general population of children than it is in the foster care context, African American children in Maryland experience parental incarceration at a disproportionate rate. [Maryland's long history of anti-Black violence, discrimination, exploitation and economic oppression](#) coupled with the wide spread practice of [criminalizing of poverty](#) has resulted in African American Marylanders being incarcerated at much higher rates than our non-African American peers. On a given day, 75% of people held in local jails have not been convicted and are held simply because they cannot afford cash bail. As a result, African American Marylanders comprise [71% of the people who are imprisoned](#) even though we only make up 29% of Maryland's population. CFCC does not believe that Maryland can afford to allow African American children living in poverty to pay the cost of forgoing PCEs and supportive relationships with their wellbeing. As the famous Marylander Fredrick Douglass said, "It is easier to build strong children than to mend broken men."

**For these reasons, CFCC supports Senate Bill 56 and urges a favorable report.**