

# **CFCC Testimony in Support of SB 56.pdf**

Uploaded by: Aubrey Edwards-Luce

Position: FAV

## 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.**

# **SB0056\_FAV\_OFJ.pdf**

Uploaded by: Dwan Burton

Position: FAV



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

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

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

FROM: Dwan Burton, Deputy Director for Out for Justice

DATE: January 9, 2025

Out for Justice, Inc. (OFJ) is an organization comprised of individuals directly and indirectly impacted by the criminal legal system advocating for reforming policies and practices that adversely affect successful reintegration into society. **OFJ supports Senate Bill 56**, which shifts 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.

In the State of Maryland, many of our families live below the poverty line and are grappling with increased living expenses. It is an essential need for incarcerated individuals to maintain affordable and accessible communication with their family, friends, and advocates. Access to phone calls and other communication methods is not a luxury—it is a lifeline. It ensures that incarcerated individuals can navigate legal processes, manage personal responsibilities, and address their basic human needs.

Maintaining communication with loved ones is vital for the mental health and well-being of incarcerated individuals. Many of these individuals are parents, siblings, or partners who rely on regular contact to support their children, maintain family bonds, and address personal affairs. For parents in particular, these calls are crucial for participating in their children's lives, whether that involves assisting with school decisions, offering emotional support, or ensuring their children's safety and stability.

For those navigating the complexities of the justice system, affordable access to phone calls enables them to collaborate with legal counsel, connect with advocates, and gather the necessary



information to support their cases. Their ability to mount a meaningful defense is severely hindered without this access.

Unfortunately, the current cost of communication for incarcerated individuals and their families is exorbitantly high, creating unnecessary barriers that disproportionately affect low-income and marginalized communities. Families often bear the financial burden of these costs, and many are forced to choose between staying connected and meeting other basic needs. This financial strain undermines the rehabilitative goals of incarceration and perpetuates cycles of poverty and disconnection.

By addressing these barriers, we can ensure that all incarcerated individuals have equitable access to communication, which is critical for maintaining their dignity, supporting their rehabilitation, and ultimately fostering safer communities.

For these reasons, Out for Justice supports Senate Bill 56 and urges a favorable report.

# **SB0056\_FAV\_STARNES\_OFJ.pdf**

Uploaded by: Elizabeth Starnes

Position: FAV



## **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

# **SB 56 CCJR FAV.pdf**

Uploaded by: Heather Warnken

Position: FAV



## **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:** Center for Criminal Justice Reform, University of Baltimore School of Law

**DATE:** January 7, 2025

The University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Criminal Justice Reform ("the Center") is dedicated to supporting community-driven efforts to improve public safety and address the harm and inequities caused by the criminal legal system. The Center submits this written testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 56.

This important bill will eliminate the cost of telephone calls for incarcerated individuals in state correctional facilities and their families, promote the ability of these individuals to maintain vital contact with their loved ones, and promote fair access to communication services in Maryland's correctional facilities.

The Center urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 56 for three primary reasons. First, SB 56 will further the state's efforts to reduce recidivism and promote public safety. Second, SB 56 will afford incarcerated individuals and their already burdened loved ones with a more viable means of continued communication. Third, SB 56 will improve conditions in Maryland correctional facilities for both incarcerated people and the correctional workforce, thereby promoting much-needed retention for staff.

#### **I. Communication strengthens connections between incarcerated people and their support networks, thereby helping to reduce recidivism and improve public safety.**

Research shows that communication between incarcerated people, their families, and support networks leads to myriad benefits.<sup>1</sup> First, social ties, strengthened by continued communication, have been found to support increased parole success rates and decreased recidivism.<sup>2</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> Leah Wong, *Research Roundup: The Positive Impacts of Family Contact for Incarcerated People and Their Families*, PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE (Dec. 21, 2021), [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/).

<sup>2</sup> Kelle Barrick et al., *Reentering Women: The Impact of Social Ties on Long-Term Recidivism*, 94 PRISON J. 279, 283 (2014); see also Rebecca L. Naser & Christy A. Visher, *Family Members' Experiences with Incarceration and Reentry*, W. CRIMINOLOGY REV., Aug. 2006, at 21 (citing multiple studies that illustrate a "remarkably consistent association . . . between family contact during incarceration and lower recidivism rates").

findings remain true even among individuals categorized as “high-risk.”<sup>3</sup> Decreased recidivism rates will make the public safer. Second, Senate Bill 56 supports public safety in another key respect: by reducing violence and disorder within correctional facilities. One study found that phone calls from children to their incarcerated parents reduce rule violations by the incarcerated individuals during incarceration.<sup>4</sup> Strengthening communication and connections between incarcerated people and their loved ones will reduce anti-social behavior, improve conditions of confinement, and otherwise promote human dignity behind the walls. These critical benefits will serve to improve safety both inside institutions and in the communities to which formerly incarcerated people return.

## **II. The high costs of communication put an immense burden on low-income families.**

Though The Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (“DPSCS” or the “Department”) has made great strides recently in offering tablets and other means of communicating with families, talking on the telephone remains the most common way for incarcerated individuals to stay in touch with loved ones.<sup>5</sup> Currently, however, costs for such communications are a significant barrier. Indeed, from January through August 2022, telephone calls made by incarcerated individuals resulted in \$746,399 in costs for incarcerated individuals and their families.<sup>6</sup> Based on population figures from June 2022, this amounted to \$18.77 a month per individual.<sup>7</sup> A study surveying fourteen states examined the burdens of these communication costs borne by an incarcerated person’s loved ones.<sup>8</sup> This study found that a staggering number of families—1 in 3—went into debt in order to cover the costs of maintaining contact with their incarcerated loved ones.<sup>9</sup> Many incarcerated individuals have low-income families<sup>10</sup> that are not

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 284 (describing the demographic of study participants). While the study found that participants who were most likely to recidivate were “younger at the time of their first arrest” and had a greater number of prior charges, greater family contact during incarceration still suggested reduced recidivism. *Id.* at 290, 293.

<sup>4</sup> Kelle Barrick et al., *Reentering Women: The Impact of Social Ties on Long-Term Recidivism*, 94 PRISON J. 279, 283 (2014).

<sup>5</sup> *Phone Services*, MD. DEP’T OF PUB. SAFETY & CORR. SERVS., [https://www.dpscs.state.md.us/inmateservs/phone\\_services.shtml](https://www.dpscs.state.md.us/inmateservs/phone_services.shtml) (last visited Feb. 27, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> MD. DIV. OF PUB. SAFETY & CORR. SERVS., OPERATIONS ANNUAL REPORT FY 2022, at 19 (2022), [https://dlslibrary.state.md.us/publications/Exec/DPSCS/DOC/COR3-207\(d\)\\_2022.pdf](https://dlslibrary.state.md.us/publications/Exec/DPSCS/DOC/COR3-207(d)_2022.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> ANALYSIS OF FY 2025 BUDGET, *supra* note 7, at 21. While the Center strongly supports SB 56 as written, it would also support it if amended to apply to county jails in addition to state correctional facilities. Accordingly, the Center finds it important to note that in some counties, monthly costs to incarcerated individuals and their families are likely higher, as 15-minute phone calls cost as much \$3.15. *Prison Jail Telecom Data: County*, WORTH RISES (Feb. 23, 2024), <https://github.com/WorthRises/PrisonJailTelecomData/blob/main/2024/02-23-24/county.csv> (citing costs as high as \$3.15 for a 15-minute call in Caroline, Carroll, Dorchester, Queen Anne’s, and Worcester counties).

<sup>8</sup> SANETA DE VUONO-POWELL ET AL., WHO PAYS?: THE TRUE COST OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILIES 30 (2015), <https://static.prisonpolicy.org/scans/who-pays%20Ella%20Baker%20report.pdf>. Survey participants resided in California, Louisiana, Washington, Virginia, Ohio, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Rhode Island, DC, New Jersey, Kansas, Texas, and New York. *Id.* at 53.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 30.

<sup>10</sup> All of the five counties with the highest imprisonment rate per 100,000 had poverty rates of over 10% in 2021 with two (Baltimore City and Somerset County) estimated to have over a 20% poverty rate. *See Number of People in Prison in 2020 from Each Maryland County*, PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/origin/md/2020/county.html> (last visited Feb. 27, 2024); *Household Income*, MD. MANUAL ONLINE: ECONOMY, <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/economy/html/income.html> (last visited Feb. 27, 2024).

well positioned to bear these financial burdens, and many others experience the traumatizing set of changed life circumstances caused by family separation. This is further compounded by the difficulties of in-person visitation due to distance, limited resources including inadequate paid leave and other barriers. Removing this financial burden from incarcerated individuals and their families will make continued telephone communication more viable.

### **III. Expanded access to communication services will improve conditions within correctional facilities to the benefit of incarcerated people and the correctional workforce alike.**

DPSCS recognizes that “direct lines of communication with family and friends” lead to “reduced agitation, behavioral issues, and idleness among incarcerated individuals.”<sup>11</sup> Increasing access to telephone communications by eliminating associated costs will serve to increase these positive effects and will promote safer working conditions for correctional officers (“COs”), thereby increasing staff retention.

Increasing access to telephone communication will create a safer working environment for COs and volunteers. In turn, this would improve job satisfaction and promote retention at a time when the state is facing significant challenges due to shortages in the correctional work force. The Department has experienced escalating staffing shortages since 2015.<sup>12</sup> These staffing shortages have led to mandatory overtime and burnout among COs<sup>13</sup> and have negatively impacted morale and job satisfaction, contributing to reduced CO retention rates.<sup>14</sup> While DPSCS efforts, such as \$5,000 new hire bonuses,<sup>15</sup> have supported the hiring of new COs, the Department reports that more COs are departing DPSCS each year than are being hired.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, increased CO retention would reduce the need for overtime, which cost Maryland \$185.6 million in 2023,<sup>17</sup> and decrease spending on CO hiring bonuses, which cost \$1.59 million in 2023.<sup>18</sup>

Staff shortages compound other problems in the correctional system. These shortages adversely impact numerous programs and services, limiting access to in-person visitation, educational activities, recreation, medical appointments, and delay food preparation.<sup>19</sup> The loss of

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<sup>11</sup> MD. DIV. OF PUB. SAFETY & CORR. SERVS, ANALYSIS OF THE FY 2025 MARYLAND EXECUTIVE BUDGET 22 (2024), <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/pubs/budgetfiscal/2025fy-budget-docs-operating-Q00B-DPSCS-Corrections.pdf> [hereinafter ANALYSIS OF FY 2025 BUDGET]. While this finding was in relation to the DPSCS’s tablet computer program, an initiative that launched in fiscal year 2023, the tablets are capable of making voice phone calls which cost the same as phone calls from wall phones. *Id.* at 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 16 (citing “a net loss of COs” in 2023).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> MD. DIV. OF PUB. SAFETY & CORR. SERVS, OVERVIEW – Q00: FY 2025 MARYLAND EXECUTIVE BUDGET RESPONSE TO DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES ANALYSIS 6 (2024), <https://dbm.maryland.gov/budget/FY2025Testimony/Q00.pdf> [hereinafter DPSCS RESPONSE].

<sup>17</sup> ANALYSIS OF FY 2025 BUDGET, *supra* note 7, at 15.

<sup>18</sup> MD. DIV. OF PUB. SAFETY & CORR. SERVS, ANALYSIS OF THE FY 2025 MARYLAND EXECUTIVE BUDGET 15 (2024), <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/pubs/budgetfiscal/2025fy-budget-docs-operating-Q00B-DPSCS-Corrections.pdf> [hereinafter ANALYSIS OF FY 2025 BUDGET]; MD. DIV. OF PUB. SAFETY & CORR. SERVS, OVERVIEW – Q00: FY 2025 MARYLAND EXECUTIVE BUDGET RESPONSE TO DEPARTMENT OF LEGISLATIVE SERVICES ANALYSIS 6 (2024), <https://dbm.maryland.gov/budget/FY2025Testimony/Q00.pdf> [hereinafter DPSCS RESPONSE].

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 8.

these critical services have been tied to increased assaults between incarcerated individuals and between incarcerated individuals and staff.<sup>20</sup> This further threatens the safety and mental health of COs, and makes expanding access to communication services especially critical.

The Center fully supports this important bill as part of a broader set of efforts to improve public safety, promote safe conditions for the correctional work force and incarcerated population, remove barriers to reentry, alleviate financial burdens on impacted families, and reduce rates of reincarceration. For these reasons, we respectfully urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 56.

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<sup>20</sup> ANALYSIS OF FY 2025 BUDGET, *supra* note 7, at 9 exhibit 6, 16.

## **SB 56 - State Correctional Facilities - Incarcerat**

Uploaded by: Mark Woodard

Position: FAV



*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

**Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 56**

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

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

FROM: Job Opportunities Task Force

DATE: January 9, 2024

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. **JOTF supports Senate Bill 56, which shifts 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.**

Almost all incarcerated individuals will be released back into the community. Consequently, the community, taxpayers, DPSCS, the Administration, legislature, and of course the inmates have an interest in their successful re-entry. Family and friend connection through telephonic communication and establishing or improving educational, vocational and job skills together increase the chances of successful re-entry. That would decrease the recidivism rate and thereby reduce the number of those incarcerated saving the taxpayers \$50,000-\$60,000 per inmate. Not only does it save taxpayers and the state money but it also improves public safety by decreasing crime.

Our coalition partner, Worth Rises has led successful campaigns in several other states and large counties and has done so at much lower costs than our state is paying the current vendor at this time. For instance, under the current contract the vendor is charging 3.2 cents per minute while other states are only paying less than 1 cent to about 2 cents per minute thereby reducing overall costs by up to two-thirds.

The Advisory Committee that includes DPSCS will review other states and make recommendations to the Administration and the legislature regarding the best and most cost effective way of proceeding in making this policy successful. This bill will promote successful re-entry, reduce recidivism, reduce crime thereby improving public safety and can be done at a much lower cost.

Finally, because we are aware of the current budget challenges we have a delayed effective date of July 2026 rather than 2025.

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

**For more information, contact:**  
Mark Woodard / Policy Advocate / [Mark@jotf.org](mailto:Mark@jotf.org)



# **SB 56 KennedyKouadio Jan 7 2025.pdf**

Uploaded by: Michele Kouadio

Position: FAV

## **Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 56**

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

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

FROM: **Michele Kennedy-Kouadio, Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform MAJR,**

**District 20 Voter**

DATE: January 9, 2024

**MAJR Michele Kennedy-Kouadio supports Senate Bill 56, which shifts the cost of telephone calls from incarcerated individuals and their families to the state starting in July 2026, 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.**

Almost all incarcerated individuals will be released back into the community. My son will be one of them.

Consequently, the community, taxpayers, DPSCS, the Administration, legislature, and of course the inmates have an interest in their successful re-entry. My son and his family and friends benefit from regular telephone communication

My son earns \$20 a month for a work schedule that is 160 hours a month. I pay commissary, food and communication costs. Reducing my cost for telephone communications would help me and many other families struggling to support themselves and their family or friends behind the walls in Maryland prisons. Telephone access is a life line when people in prison suffer from lack of essential medical, psychiatric or dental needs.

Regular affordable communication will contribute to the decrease the recidivism rate and thereby reduce the number of those incarcerated saving the taxpayers \$50,000-\$60,000 per inmate. Not only does it save taxpayers and the state money but it also improves public safety by decreasing crime.

Our coalition partner, Worth Rises has led successful campaigns in several other states and large counties and has done so at much lower costs than our state is paying the current vendor at this time. For instance, under the current contract the vendor is charging 3.2 cents per minute while other states are only paying less than 1 cent to about 2 cents per minute thereby reducing overall costs by up to two-thirds.

The Advisory Committee that includes DPSCS will review other states and make recommendations to the Administration and the legislature regarding the best and most cost effective way of proceeding in making this policy successful. This bill will promote successful re-entry, reduce recidivism, reduce crime thereby improving public safety and can be done at a much lower cost.

Finally, because we are aware of the current budget challenges we have a delayed effective date of July

2026 rather than 2025.

**For these reasons, MAJR Michele Kennedy-Kouadio supports Senate Bill 56 and urges a favorable report.**

# **FFJC testimony SB0056 - MD Phone Call Fees.pdf**

Uploaded by: Sarah Couture

Position: FAV

## **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 0056:**

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

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

FROM: Sarah Couture, Regional Director, Fines and Fees Justice Center

DATE: Tuesday, January 7, 2025

The Fines and Fees Justice Center (FFJC) thanks the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee for scheduling this important hearing and **urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 0056. This bill 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.**

Communication between those incarcerated and their families and friends is extremely important. The costs of phone calls are burdensome to those incarcerated, while the benefits of communication between incarcerated individuals and their families extend beyond just the individuals. JOTF requested that FFJC provide testimony on SB0056, and **we urge the Committee to pass SB0056.** This would have a meaningful and direct impact on the residents of the state of Maryland. More importantly, this is the best way to move towards evidence-based policies that reduce recidivism, increase successful reentry, and make incarceration safer for all.

#### **Benefits of Phone Calls in Prisons and Jails:**

The minimum wage for unskilled positions with Maryland Correctional Enterprises is \$2.16 per day, meaning a 30-minute in-state call can cost almost double the daily earnings of an incarcerated individual.<sup>1</sup> Many [studies](#) have shown that regular phone calls and visitation with families and incarcerated individuals lead to reduced recidivism and increased rehabilitation post-release. For parents who are incarcerated, calling and receiving calls from their children is particularly impactful, as they are less likely to experience rule violations when they can engage in these calls. When San Francisco, California made jail phone calls free, the sheriff's office reported that the change in communications had a positive impact on everyone, including creating a calming effect in the jails themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/appendices2022\\_5.html](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/appendices2022_5.html)

[As the Urban Institute has reported:](#)

- **Benefits for children of incarcerated parents.** Positive parent-child connections help with [mental and physical development in children](#) and support their learning as adolescents. One study found that 83 percent of the interviewed children of incarcerated parents [reported staying in contact with their incarcerated parent](#) (PDF) (56 percent by phone calls and videos). They reported success in their personal and professional lives as a result of their positive relationship with their incarcerated parent.
- **Benefits for incarcerated family members.** Frequent calls [promote parent-child relationships](#), resulting in parents expressing better [self-esteem as active parents and displaying better behavior while in prison](#). Consistent phone calls with family members have also been shown to [reduce anxiety and depression among incarcerated people](#).
- **Benefits for correctional institutions and society.** Within the first five years of release, incarcerated people with strong family connections are [25 percent more likely to cease criminal activity](#), helping to reduce jail populations and ease the burden on correctional staff.

### **Economic Harms:**

Most incarcerated people and their families are low-income. Taking money out of the pockets of lower-income families and individuals takes the dollar out of circulation where consumer spending is the biggest driver for a local economy. The costs of these phone calls force incarcerated people and their families to choose between paying for necessities or staying connected. The financial impact of this choice is felt most acutely by economically distressed communities and communities of color. **According to the Federal Reserve, one-third of Americans with a family income less than \$25,000 per year are unable to pay off their monthly bills, even without unexpected emergencies.**<sup>2</sup> Adding the burden of paying to be able to communicate with incarcerated loved ones only adds to the stress and financial burdens of families in Maryland. Making phone calls free would immediately keep critical, life-sustaining dollars in the pockets of Maryland families who are already struggling financially and stop the accumulation of any further debt or sacrifices due to the cost of these calls.

### **Maryland SB0056**

Passage of SB0056 would be a positive move toward ending harmful fees in Maryland.

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<sup>2</sup> Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2022 - May 2023.  
<https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2023-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2022-expenses.htm>

While many states still charge for phone calls, a growing number of states do not. Recognizing the benefits of free phone calls and communications, states are ending these practices, creating better opportunities for those reentering to succeed. In recent years California, Minnesota, Connecticut, Colorado, and Massachusetts have made phone calls free as well as more local jurisdictions across the country.

### **Conclusion**

Maryland's pursuit to make phone calls free is a meaningful step towards evidence-based practices that create meaningful changes in our criminal legal system.

The Fines and Fees Justice Center will continue to work for a more just and equitable system. We know this Committee will, too. We look forward to doing it together.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. **We respectfully urge a favorable report on SB0056.**

*Sarah Couture*

Sarah Couture  
Regional Director  
Fines and Fees Justice Center  
scouture@finesandfeesjusticecenter.org

# **CFUF Testimony, Favorable SB 56.pdf**

Uploaded by: Zachary Alberts

Position: FAV



## **Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 56**

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

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

FROM: Center for Urban Families

DATE: January 9, 2024

**The Center for Urban Families, a workforce development and family strengthening organization based in West Baltimore, supports Senate Bill 56, which reduces the cost of jail phone calls for incarcerated individuals and their families 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.**

Almost all incarcerated individuals will be released back into the community. Consequently, the community, taxpayers, DPSCS, the Administration, legislature, and the inmates have an interest in their successful re-entry. Staying connected to ones family and friends through telephonic communication is proven to increase the chance of successful re-entry. This bill would decrease recidivism rates and save the taxpayers an estimated \$50,000-\$60,000 per inmate. Not only does it save money, but it also decreases crime.

Our coalition partner, Worth Rises has led successful campaigns in several other states and large counties and has done so at much lower costs than our state is paying the current vendor at this time. For instance, under the current contract the vendor is charging 3.2 cents per minute while other states are paying less than 2 cents per minute.

The Advisory Committee that includes DPSCS will review other states' policies and make recommendations to the Administration and the legislature regarding the best and most cost-effective way to implement this bill.

**For these reasons, the Center for Urban Families supports Senate Bill 56 and urges a favorable report.**