

Dear Chair Clippinger and House Judiciary Committee Members,

We are Penni and Alan Barnett and we are speaking in support of HB 0401. In 2023, our son was arrested and detained pretrial for behavior that was caused by severe mental illness. Our experience during his intake and incarceration convinced us that communication between incarcerated people and their friends and family is very important for the mental health and rehabilitation of that person. Furthermore, the harm caused by lack of communication decreases the chance that the incarcerated person, when released, will resume life as a productive citizen. Although the details of our son's case are unusual, we believe that the difficulties communicating with family and the potential consequences of failure to do so are faced by many. We therefore strongly urge you to vote yes on HB 0401 to make phone calls from jails and prisons free for incarcerated Marylanders and their families, and readily available.

In February 2023, when our son was arrested in Montgomery County lack of transparency and communication about the process of communicating with him meant that while our son was distressed we were unable to reach him for two days before someone finally told us how to set up an account with ICS that would permit our son to call us. The system is inefficient and families suffer.

The jail's website states that incarcerated people can make collect calls. This is not true, and the process of funding the prepaid phone account through ICS is extremely difficult and opaque, with hard-to-follow automations and no human operators readily available. To fund an account the fees are high and require use of a credit or debit card, which many of fewer means do not have. An inefficient and antiquated system is robbing millions from tax paying families every year.

We are fortunate to be able to afford the expensive prepaid phone plan for our son. Many are not so fortunate. For example, we have made multiple calls on behalf of our son's cell mate, who could not otherwise reach his own family. This situation is not uncommon.

Our son was incarcerated during a period of severe mental illness. While in jail he received no medical or psychiatric treatment of any kind. He was under a lot of stress, and during our calls he frequently broke down and cried. His condition would have become much worse if he had not been able to get the emotional support our daily phone calls provided. Many people incarcerated in Maryland's prisons and jails cannot get such support because of the expense and difficulty of making phone calls. You can make a difference in the lives of thousands of families by passing the proposed legislation.

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Penelope and Alan Barnett
2500 Jennings Road
Silver Spring, MD 20902
301-949-2297