



**Testimony in Support of HB 0401 to Provide Free Communication
to People Incarcerated in Maryland Prisons and Their Families**

February 4, 2025

Dear Chair Clippinger and House Judiciary Committee,

My name is Antonya Jeffrey, and I am the Director of Policy Campaigns and Government Affairs at Worth Rises, a national non-profit dedicated to ending the exploitation of people impacted by incarceration. I submit this testimony in support of HB 0401 to make prison and jail communication free for incarcerated people and their families in Maryland, and include a letter from the Connecting Families coalition, a state fact sheet on prison communication, a policy fact sheet regarding the legislation, testimonials from impacted Marylanders, and a fiscal analysis of the legislation.

Thank you for taking the time to hear testimony in regards to this important legislation, namely on the cost of prison communications and its impact. We are also grateful to Delegate Roberson for sponsoring HB 0401. We hope you will take particular note of the powerful stories of people who have been directly impacted by incarceration and how the exorbitant cost of prison communication has weighed on their lives. I will focus my testimony, instead, on the policy arguments and fiscal considerations that support this bill.

Worth Rises strongly supports HB 0401, which will make communication free for incarcerated individuals and their loved ones beginning in July 2026. The delayed start date provides time to develop a sustainable funding plan and ensure successful execution. To further support a smooth and cost-effective transition, the bill establishes an Advisory Committee to assess the current telecom program and recommend implementation strategies.

Worth Rises has helped jurisdictions across the country move toward providing free communications for incarcerated people and their support networks. We led the first successful state campaign in Connecticut and additional state campaigns in California, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Colorado. We also led successful local campaigns in New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, and Miami. We are currently supporting similar campaigns in over a dozen state and local jurisdictions. Accordingly, we know what it takes to implement this policy and are committed to helping Maryland do so.

Maryland has the opportunity to join others on the forefront of this national movement to provide overdue relief to millions of families with incarcerated loved ones by simply making communication free. Today, **Maryland families currently pay the state's prison telecom vendor, Global Tel Link, an estimated \$12.0 million each year to speak to their incarcerated loved ones.** This money comes from the families — including grandparents, parents, spouses, siblings, children, and friends — of those incarcerated in Maryland. They are often forced to choose between paying for basic necessities, housing, and food and paying to hear the voices of their incarcerated loved ones. In fact, one in three families with an incarcerated loved one goes into debt trying to stay connected, and 87% of those bearing this enormous financial burden are women.¹

However, family support can change how successful a person is both during and after their incarceration. It increases hope, reduces desperation, and encourages positive behavior, which in turn, reduces violence and improves the correctional environment for incarcerated people and correctional officers alike. One correctional administrator from Connecticut remarked about the policy and implementation there, “It’s not going to stop all the incidents, but it’s definitely curbing a lot of them. I understand that there has been some frustration among taxpayers about bearing the burden of the phone calls, but as someone who works inside the walls I can say that it is working and we do appreciate it.” Families, too, have endless stories of how free calls have changed their lives.

Based on our prior work, **we estimate that providing free phone calls to incarcerated people and their loved ones will cost the state \$2.8 million per year.** We base our estimate on known rates around the country that start as low as \$0.009 per minute. We use our model to then measure the expected increase in volume based on expected tablet infrastructure from 27.9 minutes per person per day to 43.4 minutes. We conduct similar analyzes for the other includes services, namely video calls and electronic messages. Please note that there are always new compensation models rolling out that could further lower the cost, however, what the agency has been offered outside of a competitive bidding process doesn’t represent that.

Additionally, our estimate accounts for new regulations passed by the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC), which beyond significantly lowering rates for phone and video calls and prohibiting ancillary fees, including deposit fees, also banned commissions and the pass through of surveillance costs to incarcerated people and their families. While some regulations have already gone into effect, Maryland will need to comply with all of the new regulations by January 1, 2026. And while some cite ongoing litigation against the FCC as a reason to ignore its regulations, we note that litigation challenging new regulations is common, the court has denied all stay petitions, and the rules began implementation on January 1, 2025.

The bottom line is that the cost of providing free prison communication pales in comparison to what families are currently paying as well as what the state spends on its correctional system and would return

¹ Criminal Justice Budget and Funding Opportunity Analysis. Public Sector Consultants, 2021.; See also, Program and Special Equipment Fund Revenues and Expenditures. Michigan Department of Corrections. https://www.michigan.gov/corrections/0,4551,7-119-1441_1513-519821--,00.html

much more. Again, studies have consistently shown that communication between incarcerated people and their support networks increases hope inside, strengthens families, mitigates trauma for children facing parental incarceration, improves reentry success, and increases public safety.² Providing such communication at no cost would lift a critical burden off the shoulders of Maryland families, making these benefits more accessible.

In closing, we ask that you vote yes on HB 0401. Thank you for your consideration, and please do not hesitate to reach out with questions at ajeffrey@worthrises.org.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Antonya Jeffrey', written in a cursive style.

Antonya Jeffrey
Director of Policy Campaigns and Government Affairs
Worth Rises

² Wong, Leah. “Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families.” Prison Policy Initiative, 2021. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/