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Costly Prison Phone Call Fees Block Families From Connecting to Incarcerated Loved Ones

Position Statement in Support of House Bill 401

Given before the Judiciary Committee

The cost of living for people who are incarcerated in Maryland includes, but isn't limited to, the cost of phone calls and commissary products, such as medication and hygiene products. These costs can be unaffordable for low-income families trying to stay connected to and support a loved one while they are behind bars. **The Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 401 because allowing low-cost communication between incarcerated Marylanders and their families can further rehabilitation and increase economic security.**

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, prison phone call fees in Maryland are \$0.48 for a 15-minute callⁱ. Research shows that prison phone calls, between family members or medical providers, are often priced at excessive ratesⁱⁱ. In addition, substandard wages for inmates, varying between \$0.17 and \$1.16 hourly, make it difficult for them to afford these costs on their own. This in turn increases the burden on their families, who often foot these exorbitant bills.ⁱⁱⁱ These fees, which are effectively a regressive tax, should not be levied on Maryland's low-income families. At the same time, these fees are not effective at generating revenue for the state as most incarcerated individuals have little ability to pay^{iv}.

Being able to make phone calls while incarcerated benefits everyone. One study found 83 percent of the interviewed children of incarcerated parents reported improved education outcomes by staying in contact with their incarcerated parent.^v They also reported success in their personal and professional lives because of their positive relationship with their incarcerated parent.

As telecommunication fees paid have increased over the last three years, the current agreement between the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) and the outside telecom vendor is not revenue-generating. Since Fiscal 2016, profits from these calls are not deposited into inmate welfare funds, which are used by each facility for goods and services that benefit the general incarcerated individual population^{vi}. If these fees are not contributing to funding services, such as education and vocational training among other support services, they are not an adequate funding source. Subsequently, House Bill 401 establishes an Advisory Committee to review and analyze several factors related to phone call fees, such as best practices in other states, data on the monthly volume of calls, rates and fee paid by DPSCS for equipment and services and more, and report its finding and recommendations.

Implementing no-cost prison and jail phone call fees allows for more consistent communication between and saves them from going into debt to stay in touch with their loved ones. **For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the Judicial Proceedings Committee make favorable report on House Bill 401.**

Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 401

Bill summary

House Bill 401 will prevent a state correctional facility and a telephone service provider from charging an incarcerated individual or a third party, including the recipient of a telephone call, for an incarcerated individual's use of telephone equipment or telephone services in a state correctional facility. It also states a State correctional facility is responsible for the payment of any cost charged by a telephone service provider for such equipment and services. Lastly, the bill establishes the Costs of Telephone Communications Advisory Committee, staffed by the Department of Legislative Services (DLS), that is responsible for reviewing data on prison phone call fees and report their findings to the Governor and General Assembly.

Background

Prison phone call fees can be unaffordable for low-income families trying to keep in touch with incarcerated loved ones. The average rate in Maryland in 2021 was \$0.48 for a 15-minute call.

Equity Implications

High-cost telecommunication particularly impacts Black Marylanders, who make up more than 70% of the state's prison population – twice their representation in Maryland's overall population^{vii}.

- Total direct pre-paid and collect calls (fees paid both by incarcerated Marylanders or their family) amount to \$9.3 million in FY24^{viii}. These are funds often paid for by individuals and families who are low-income and can result in going into debt.

Impact

House Bill 401 would likely **impact racial and economic equity** in Maryland.

ⁱ https://www.prisonpolicy.org/phones/appendices2022_1.html

ⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/01/1146370950/prison-phone-call-cost-martha-wright-biden>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.mdeconomy.org/budgeting-for-opportunity-justice/>

^{iv} <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/americas-dystopian-incarceration-system-pay-stay-behind-bars>

^v <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61bcb00634061a13526f653c/t/61cd187f2ea59e4d19ce66d6/1640831107402/Children+of+Incarcerated+Parents+Pathways+to+Resilience+%26+Success+Research+Report+2021.pdf>

^{vi} https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2025RS/fnotes/bil_0001/hbo401.pdf

^{vii} <https://dpscs.maryland.gov/publicinfo/publications/pdfs/Inmate%20Characteristics%20Report%20FY%202022%20Q4.pdf>

^{viii} https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2025RS/fnotes/bil_0006/sbo056.pdf