

September 17, 2020

Legislative Office Building
300 Capitol Avenue
Hartford, CT 06106

President Pro Tempore Looney
Senate Majority Leader Duff
Senator Winfield
Senator Osten

Speaker Aresimowicz
House Majority Leader Ritter
Representative Stafstrom
Representative Walker

It has been eighteen months since the Connecticut legislature was most recently asked to address the egregious cost of prison phone calls. Despite promises to do so both contractually and legislatively, the situation in Connecticut has not gotten better, in fact, it has gotten worse thanks to COVID-19. There is no more time and not another dime that Connecticut families can afford to wait and spend on our prison communication crisis.

We, the undersigned 20 organizations, urge the Connecticut legislature to pass legislation during its special session this September to stop charging families for prison phone calls. Our ask is echoed by 2,202 Connecticut residents who signed a related petition (see Appendix).

Last year, Connecticut ranked 49th in the country in the affordability of prison phone calls. Many legislators who learned of this predation, and the state's role in profiting off these calls, gasped. But this year, Connecticut ranks 50th, or last, because Arkansas, which contracts with the same vendor and had slightly higher rates, recognized the crisis families were facing in light of the pandemic and lowered rates—now 38% to 54% lower than ours in Connecticut. But we do not need legislators to gasp again, we need you to act.

Like all families, families with incarcerated loved ones have sought connectedness during this critical time. In fact, families impacted by incarceration are desperate to connect because the wellbeing of their loved ones is more at risk than most. As of last month, roughly 16 percent of Connecticut's prison population had contracted COVID-19, making the virus ten times more prevalent in the state's prisons than in the broader community.[1]

But visits have been suspended across all Connecticut prisons, and there is no immediate plan to return them, leaving calls as the only way for families to connect. And while the state's vendor continues to offer two free phone calls per week, this ration is not even close to what families need. A recent survey of another jail system showed that COVID-19 has increased spending on calls by nearly 50 percent despite the allocation of limited free call credits.[2]

Prior to the pandemic, nearly one in three of families with an incarcerated loved one went into debt trying to stay connected and women—largely Black and Brown women—carried 87 percent of the burden.[3] But like many failures of our social infrastructure, COVID-19 has exposed and worsened this tragic reality. Today, these statistics are undeniably worse as families struggle to stay afloat during the current economic crisis.

Connecticut is experiencing unprecedented unemployment rates, estimated by the Department of Labor to be in around 15 percent in July. Moreover, job loss has been concentrated in low-paid industries in which many families with incarcerated loved ones—who are disproportionately Black, Brown, and economically distressed—work. These families and their children are going without food and facing evictions.[4] They are also the same families and children disproportionately targeted by mass incarceration and reliant on prison communication. The compounding of these injustices has had a devastating impact on our most marginalized.

We understand that the special session will be dedicated to dealing with the economic crisis that is currently plaguing our state as we continue to deal with COVID-19. And it is within that framework that we ask you consider the financial burden that families with incarcerated loved ones are facing due to the egregious cost of prison phone calls charged by the state and its predatory vendor. Respectfully, we implore you not to use COVID-19 as an excuse to avoid action on this issue, but instead as an opportunity to cure an acute harm with long-term benefits.

We also recognize that this legislation has fiscal implications, and note that Governor Lamont put \$5.5 million toward this initiative in his budget proposal at the start of the year, an amount that covers a large part of its most substantial budgetary implication: the loss of roughly \$8 million in unethical revenues collected by the state through commissions. Based on actual figures in the market, we estimate that the true cost of providing phone service to families and their incarcerated loved ones—without the state enriching itself—would be just \$1.1 to \$1.3 million annually given the current size of the prison population. Compare this to the nearly \$14 million that families were spending on prison phone calls pre-COVID-19, which has increased since.

In light of the realities brought to bear by COVID-19, the high cost of prison communication that separates families can no longer be ignored. The Connecticut legislature must act now to protect families with incarcerated loved ones. The cost of a call should never bar someone from ensuring their loved one is healthy, or worse, from comforting them if they are not.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Connecticut
Collaborative Center for Justice
Color Of Change

Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR)
CT Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative
EMERGE Connecticut
Greater Hartford Legal Aid
Hartford Deportation Defense
Mourning Our Losses
National Consumer Law Center
New Haven Women's Resettlement Working Group
New Lifestyles Transitional Housing for Women
Newlife Women Empowerment
Progressive Prison Ministries
Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ
Stop Solitary CT
Voices Of Women Of Color
Women Against Mass Incarceration
Worth Rises
Yale Undergraduate Prison Project

APPENDIX

Dear Connecticut Legislator,

It's your responsibility to protect Connecticut families. Right now, our state and its prison telecom vendor are charging families unfair and unjust rates to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones--some of the highest in the nation.

At these rates, families are forced to either choose between paying for basic necessities and hearing from a loved one or take on debt. We should be encouraging family connections, not exploiting it. A mother is no less a mother because her son is incarcerated. All love should be treated equally.

I call on you to vote to pass legislation to stop charging families to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones.

Sincerely,

2,202 Connecticut Residents

[1] On August 19, 2020, there were 9,572 people in Connecticut prisons, available at https://cjis-dashboard.ct.gov/CJPPD_REPORTS/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=Total_Counts, accessed September 10, 2020. As of the same date, 1,500 people in Connecticut prisons had tested positive for COVID-19, available at <https://portal.ct.gov/DOC/Common-Elements/Common-Elements/Health-Information-and-Advisories>, accessed September 10, 2020. As of September 10, 2020, Connecticut had 15,045 cases of COVID-19 per 1,000,000 residents, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/connecticut-coronavirus-cases.html>, accessed September 10, 2020.

[2] Proprietary and confidential analysis by Worth Rises.

[3] *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*, Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design (2015), available at <https://ellabakercenter.org/who-pays-the-true-cost-of-incarceration-on-families>.

[4] Connecticut Comptroller Kevin Limbo September 1, 2020 press release, available at https://www.osc.ct.gov/public/pressrl/2020/Sept12020_FinancialStatus.pdf.