

September 10, 2020

United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Senator Wicker and Senator Cantwell,

We, the undersigned 373 organizations from across the nation, write to urge you to include prison phone justice in the next stimulus package. In a moment of triple crises—a global pandemic, economic disaster, and racial injustice—you must ensure that families are able to stay connected with incarcerated loved ones.

The COVID-19 outbreak has overwhelmed many public systems, and the correctional system is no different. Prisons and jails have become breeding grounds for infection with people crowded into tight quarters, forced to share cells and showers, and denied necessary hygiene products. But in addition to the grave risk of infection that can only effectively be addressed by depopulating prisons, incarcerated people now face isolation from their families.

The ability to connect with loved ones is critical, especially as the need to check in on one another's health and well-being is at an all-time high and prison and jail visits remain suspended in many facilities. However, COVID-19 is highlighting and amplifying the tragic reality that incarcerated people and their families have been living with for decades: predatory prison and jail communication rates.

Even absent the recent crises, families struggle to stay connected with incarcerated loved ones due to the high rates charged by prison telecom corporations for phone calls, video calls, and emails. Prison telecom corporations charge as much as \$25 for a 15-minute local call,<sup>1</sup> consistently forcing families to decide between paying for rent or a call with their loved one behind bars. Nearly one third of families with incarcerated loved ones go into debt trying to stay connected, and 87% of those bearing the burden of these costs are women, and women of color in particular.<sup>2</sup> But the current crises have further exacerbated the burden of these high rates.

Today families with incarcerated loved ones, like millions of others, are struggling to stay afloat financially. They face delayed pay, job loss, unexpected elder and childcare, and, in the worst cases, their own illness. Many also include essential workers in hospitals, transportation, grocery stores, and sanitation. They should not need to worry about

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Wagner & Alexi Jones, Prison Policy Initiative, [State of Phone Justice: Local jails, state prisons and private phone providers](#) (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Saneta deVuono-powell, et al., Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Forward Together, & Research Action Design, [Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families](#) (2015).

whether they can afford to be in contact with loved ones, neither should the one in 28 children with a parent behind bars.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, continuing to allow this predation will lead to serious public health consequences. Incarcerated people and their families who are unable to afford communication are suffering from stress and despair,<sup>4</sup> which have been shown to weaken immune systems and make people more likely to succumb to infection.<sup>5</sup>

We strongly urge you to address this emergency by including the COVID-19 Compassion and Martha Wright Prison Phone Justice Act, which has already passed the House as part of the HEROES Act (H.R. 6800, §§ 130701-03), in the next stimulus package. Its Senate analog, the Martha Wright Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act (S. 1764) has bipartisan support. This legislation would provide immediate and sustainable relief to families.

The legislation would enable the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to protect families from egregiously high rates by establishing the agency's jurisdiction over intrastate communications, which comprise about 80% of all calls. FCC Chairman Ajit Pai has lamented this existing gap in the law, stating in a recent letter to state regulators that he has "repeatedly expressed [his] desire to work with Congress" to fix the FCC's lack of jurisdiction to "address unreasonably and excessively high intrastate inmate calling services rates."<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, given the FCC's lengthy rulemaking process, the legislation would set interim rate caps at \$0.04 per minute for prepaid calls and \$0.05 per minute for collect calls. It would also prohibit site commissions, eliminating one factor contributing to egregious phone call rates.

Ultimately, this legislation would not only alleviate the unjust financial burden placed on families and prevent worsening health conditions, but also benefit our nation. Time and time again, studies have shown that incarcerated people who maintain contact with their families and other support networks during their incarceration are more likely to be successful upon release.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sylvia A. Harvey, [2.7 Million Kids Have Parents in Prison. They're Losing Their Right to Visit](#), *The Nation* (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Gabe Stern, Juvenile Justice Information Exchange, [Auburn Prison COVID-fighting Policies Inconsistent, Deficient, Inmates Say](#) (2020).

<sup>5</sup> American Psychological Association, [Stress Weakens the Immune System](#) (2006).

<sup>6</sup> [Letter](#) from Ajit V. Pai, Chairman, Fed Commc'ns Comm'n to Brandon Presley, President, Nat'l Ass'n of Regulatory Utility Comm'rs (July 20, 2020) (emphasis in original).

<sup>7</sup> Ryan Shanahan & Sandra Villalobos Agudelo, [The Family and Recidivism](#), *American Jails* (2012); see also Joan Petersilia, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry* 246 (2006) ("Every known study that has been able to directly examine the relationship between a prisoner's legitimate community ties and recidivism has found that feelings of being welcome at home and the strength of interpersonal ties outside prison help predict postprison adjustment.").

We respectfully ask you to act now to protect families with incarcerated loved ones by adopting this critical piece of legislation. The cost of a call should never bar someone from ensuring their loved one is healthy, or worse yet, from comforting them if they are not.

Sincerely,

*A Challenge To Change*

*A Little Piece Of Light*

*A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment & Healing)*

*A New Way of Life Reentry Project*

*Abolition Apostles Jail and Prison Ministry*

*ACLU of Connecticut*

*ACLU of Mississippi*

*Action Center on Race and the Economy*

*Actual Innocence Clinic at the University of Texas School of Law*

*Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus*

*Advocates for Basic Legal Equality (ABLE)*

*African American Christian Clergy Coalition*

*Alabama Justice Initiative*

*Alaska Innocence Project*

*All of Us or None - Texas*

*Alliance of Families for Justice*

*Alternate ROOTS*

*American Federation of Teachers*

*American Friends Service Committee*

*American Friends Service Committee - Arizona*

*American Friends Service Committee - West Virginia*

*Americans for Financial Reform*

*Arouet Foundation*

*ARRO*

*Aspiration*

*Beauty after the Bars*

*Believers Bail Out*

*Bergen County Immigration Strategy Group*

*Black Church PAC*

*Brooklyn Community Bail Fund*

*Brooklyn Defender Services*

*Building Families Together*

*Building Promise USA*

*California Innocence Project*

*California Lawyers for the Arts*

*Californians United for a Responsible Budget*  
*Carceral Tech Resistance Network*  
*Center for Community Alternatives*  
*Center for Criminal Justice and Professional Responsibility*  
*Center for Justice at Columbia University*  
*Central Ohio Restored Citizens' Collaborative*  
*Central West Justice Center*  
*Change of Heart Ministries*  
*Charm City Care Connection*  
*Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance*  
*Chicago Community Bond Fund*  
*Children and Family Justice Center*  
*Children's Defense Fund - New York*  
*Citizens for Criminal Justice Reform*  
*Civil Rights Corps*  
*Clean Power Lake County*  
*Close Rosie's*  
*Coalition to Reduce Recidivism*  
*Collaborative Center for Justice*  
*College and Community Fellowship*  
*Color of Change*  
*Colorado Center on Law and Policy*  
*Colorado Circles for Change*  
*Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition*  
*Colorado-CURE*  
*Columbia Legal Services*  
*Communications Workers of America*  
*Communities and Families Raising for Justice*  
*Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice*  
*Community Alliance on Prisons*  
*Community Change Action*  
*Community Justice Exchange*  
*Community Justice Network for Youth at the W.H. Burns Institute*  
*Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto*  
*Community Passageways*  
*Community Service Society of New York*  
*Community Works*  
*Congregation Beth Elohim Dismantling Racism Team*  
*Connecticut Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative*  
*Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance*  
*Connecticut Legal Services*  
*Connecticut Prison Book Connection*  
*Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty*

*Conservatives For Criminal Justice Reform*  
*Constructing Our Future*  
*Correctional Association of New York*  
*COYOTE RI*  
*Critical Resistance*  
*Crossroads Fund*  
*Daughters Beyond Incarceration*  
*Dauphin County Bail Fund*  
*DecARcerate*  
*Deep Center*  
*Delaware Center for Justice*  
*Designing Justice Designing Spaces*  
*Detroit Justice Center*  
*Developing Despite Distance*  
*Dignity & Power NOW*  
*Dismas Family Farm*  
*Dramatic Impulse Theatre*  
*Drug Policy Alliance*  
*Earl Carl Institute for Legal & Social Policy*  
*Economic Freedom Fighters Indiana (EFFI)*  
*Ella Baker Center for Human Rights*  
*Emancipate NC*  
*Emancipation Initiative*  
*Empire Justice Center*  
*End Mass Incarceration Georgia Network*  
*Equal Justice Under Law*  
*Equal Justice USA*  
*Equity And Transformation*  
*EX-incarcerated People Organizing (EXPO)*  
*Exalt Youth*  
*Exodus Transitional Community*  
*Fair and Just Prosecution*  
*Faith in Texas*  
*Faith United Methodist Church*  
*Families For Freedom*  
*Families for Justice as Healing*  
*Filling the Gap*  
*Fines and Fees Justice Center*  
*Fiscal Policy Institute*  
*Florida Cares Charity Corp.*  
*Florida Justice Center*  
*Florida Legal Services*  
*Florida Rights Restoration Coalition*

*Formerly Incarcerated Union of Rhode Island*  
*Fort Wayne Justice Project*  
*Forward Justice*  
*Free Press Action*  
*Friends Committee on Legislation of California*  
*Friends Committee on National Legislation*  
*Friends of Restorative Justice*  
*From Prison Cells to PhD*  
*Frontline Dads*  
*FWD.us*  
*Galaxy Gives*  
*Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Attorneys*  
*Graham Windham*  
*Grassroots Leadership*  
*Greater Boston Legal Services*  
*Greater Hartford Legal Aid*  
*Habitat for Habilitation*  
*Hands Of Hope Outreach Ministries*  
*Hawai'i Friends of Restorative Justice*  
*Heartland Alliance*  
*Homeboy Industries*  
*Hope House*  
*Human Rights Defense Center*  
*Human Works Foundation*  
*Idaho Innocence Project*  
*Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights*  
*Illinois Innocence Project*  
*Illinois NOW*  
*Imagine Justice*  
*Immigrant Defense Project*  
*Indivisible Nation BK*  
*Initiate Justice*  
*Innocence Project*  
*Innocence Project Clinic at University of Baltimore*  
*Innocence Project New Orleans*  
*Innocence Project of Minnesota*  
*Interfaith Action for Human Rights*  
*Interfaith Alliance of Colorado*  
*International CURE*  
*Intouch Outreach*  
*Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault*  
*Iowa Unitarian Universalist Witness Advocacy Network*  
*It's A Process*

*Jaylen Barker Foundation*  
*JCCA*  
*John Howard Association*  
*Just City - Memphis*  
*Just Liberty*  
*Justice League*  
*Justice Strategies*  
*Justice Support Group*  
*JustLeadership USA*  
*Kansas Appleseed Center for Law and Justice*  
*Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty*  
*Kentucky Equal Justice Center*  
*KidsMates*  
*La Defensa*  
*LA Voice*  
*LatinoJustice PRLDEF*  
*Lawndale Christian Legal Center*  
*Legal Council for Health Justice*  
*Legal Services of New Jersey*  
*Live Free*  
*Living Beyond the Bars of Iowa*  
*Logan Square Neighborhood Association*  
*LOTO: Life on the Outside*  
*Louisville Family Justice Advocates*  
*MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Mississippi School of Law*  
*Make the Road NY*  
*Mass Liberation Arizona*  
*Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement (MASC)*  
*Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI)*  
*Media Alliance*  
*Media Mobilizing Project*  
*MediaJustice*  
*Mercy Unleashed Compassion Ministries*  
*Michigan Center for Youth Justice*  
*Michigan Citizens for Justice - Washtenaw*  
*Michigan Citizens for Prison Reform*  
*Michigan League for Public Policy*  
*Michigan Liberation*  
*Michigan-CURE*  
*Middle Ground Prison Reform*  
*Midwest Innocence Project*  
*Migrant Justice*  
*Mijente*

*Milwaukee County Human Rights Commission*  
*Mississippi Center for Justice*  
*Mississippi Poor People's Campaign*  
*Mississippi Rising Coalition*  
*Missouri-CURE*  
*Mommieactivist and Sons*  
*Moms Demand Action*  
*Mother's Against Wrongful Convictions*  
*Motherhood Beyond Bars*  
*Movement for Family Power*  
*National Alliance on Mental Illness-Iowa*  
*National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers*  
*National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low-income clients)*  
*National Council of Churches*  
*National Employment Law Project*  
*National Juvenile Justice Network*  
*National Lawyers Guild*  
*National Religious Campaign Against Torture*  
*National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated*  
*Nebraska Appleseed*  
*Nebraskans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty*  
*Nehemiah Trinity Rising*  
*Nevada Coalition Against the Death Penalty*  
*New England Innocence Project*  
*New Haven Women's Resettlement Working Group*  
*New Hour for Women & Children Long Island*  
*New Mexico Innocence and Justice Project*  
*New York County Defender Services*  
*New York Immigration Coalition*  
*Next100*  
*North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence*  
*North Carolina Justice Center*  
*Northern California Innocence Project*  
*Notes From The Village*  
*NYCAIC #HALTsolitary Campaign*  
*Obsidian Group*  
*Occupy Bergen County*  
*Ohio Rational Sexual Offense Laws*  
*Once Incarcerated*  
*One Community*  
*One Fair Wage*  
*ONE Northside*  
*One Voice*



*Operation Restoration*  
*Oregon Criminal Defense Lawyers Association*  
*Oregon-CURE*  
*Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition*  
*Osborne Center for Justice Across Generations*  
*Our Lifeline*  
*Our Piece of the Pie*  
*Parole Preparation Project*  
*Path2Redemption*  
*Peace Affirmation and Justice Committee of First Congregational Church Guilford*  
*Peoples Advocacy Institute*  
*Peter Cicchino Youth Project at the Urban Justice Center*  
*PLUS ONE society*  
*Poder in Action*  
*POPS the Club*  
*Pretrial Justice Institute*  
*Prison CONversation*  
*Prison Policy Initiative*  
*Prisoners' Legal Services of Massachusetts*  
*Progressive Prison Ministries*  
*Public Justice Center*  
*Public Knowledge*  
*Pueblo Unido PDX*  
*Queens Defenders (Formerly Queens Law Associates)*  
*R Street Institute*  
*RE:STORE Justice*  
*Reaching & Educating for Community Hope (RECH) Foundation*  
*Recess Art*  
*ReEntry Matters*  
*Reform Georgia*  
*ReInventing ReEntry*  
*Release Aging People in Prison*  
*Represent Justice Campaign*  
*Reproductive Justice Inside*  
*Restorative Justice Coalition of West Michigan*  
*Restore Justice*  
*Revolve Impact*  
*Rising Ground*  
*Rocky Mountain Innocence Center*  
*Root & Rebound*  
*Safe & Just Michigan*  
*San Francisco Public Defender*  
*SawariMedia*

*Set Free Ministries*  
*Sex Workers and Allies Network*  
*Shiloh Baptist Church of Waukegan*  
*Shriver Center on Poverty Law*  
*South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center*  
*South Carolina for Criminal Justice Reform*  
*Southern Center for Human Rights*  
*Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice*  
*Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ*  
*Southern Recovery Advocacy*  
*Speak Ya Truth*  
*Southern Poverty Law Center Action Fund*  
*Starting Over*  
*Stop Solitary CT*  
*Students for Sensible Drug Policy*  
*Take on Wall Street*  
*Team Roc (division of Roc Nation)*  
*Ten Million Strong*  
*Tennessee Justice Center*  
*Texas Advocates for Justice*  
*Texas After Violence Project*  
*Texas Appleseed*  
*Texas Criminal Defense Lawyers Association*  
*Texas Criminal Justice Coalition*  
*Texas Inmate Families Association*  
*Texas Jail Project*  
*Texas Organizing Project*  
*The #LetUsBreathe Collective*  
*The Episcopal Church of the Incarnation*  
*The Exoneration Project*  
*The Gathering for Justice*  
*The Greenlining Institute*  
*The Justice Collaborative*  
*The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls*  
*The New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents*  
*The New York Law School Post Conviction Innocence Clinic*  
*The Ordinary People Society*  
*The Osborne Association*  
*The People's Lobby*  
*The PRADO of Transitioning Forward*  
*The Real Cost of Prisons Project*  
*The Rhode Island Center for Justice*  
*The Striving To Achieve Reform Together (START) Project*

*The Soze Agency*  
*Transitions Clinic Network*  
*UltraViolet*  
*Unitarian Universalist Church Montclair, Undoing Racism Committee*  
*Unitarian Universalist FaithAction NJ*  
*Unitarian Universalist Mass Action*  
*Unitarian Universalist Prison Ministry of Illinois*  
*Unitarian Universalists for a Just Economic Community*  
*United Church of Christ, OC Inc.*  
*United Voices of Cortland*  
*University Democrats at University of Virginia*  
*Until Freedom*  
*Urban Justice Center*  
*Visionary V*  
*VOCAL-NY*  
*Voice of the Experienced (VOTE)*  
*Voices Of Women Of Color*  
*Washington Innocence Project*  
*We Are All Criminals*  
*WE GOT US NOW*  
*West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force*  
*Western Center on Law and Poverty*  
*What's Next Washington*  
*Wisconsin Innocence Project*  
*WISDOM*  
*WITNESS*  
*Witness to Innocence*  
*Witness to Mass Incarceration*  
*Women & Justice Project*  
*Women Against Mass Incarceration*  
*Women's Community Justice Association*  
*Workers Center for Racial Justice*  
*Worth Rises*  
*Yale Undergraduate Prison Project*  
*Young Women's Freedom Center*  
*Youth Justice Coalition*  
*Zealous*