



# NO-COST CALLS FOR INCARCERATED PEOPLE

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## DESCRIPTION

Prisoners' Legal Services, a member of the Keeping Families Connected Coalition, asks your support for a bill to provide telephone calls at no cost to people incarcerated in state prisons and county jails and houses of correction, including people held for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Both the Senate bill, **An Act to Keep Families Connected**, and the House bill, **An Act relative to telephone service for inmates in all correctional and other penal institutions in the Commonwealth**, would support family connections by eliminating charges for telephone calls for the person making and the person receiving the call, increasing racial and economic justice.



## WHY THIS MATTERS

Right now, families are charged exorbitant fees far higher than regular phone charges to maintain vital connections with their loved ones. This legislation would remove that burden, fostering healthier families and healthier communities.

Massachusetts families pay some \$14.4 million each year to speak by phone with incarcerated loved ones; one in three families goes into debt to stay in touch. Families affected by incarceration, largely from communities of color with few economic resources, must decide between paying for rent and groceries or paying for a child to say "Good night" and hear "I love you" from their incarcerated parent. Phone calls are a lifeline for families, especially since people without a car find it very difficult to visit many prisons and jails in the state.

Current profiteering on prison phone calls harms families and hurts our communities. Fifty years of research show that regular contact with loved ones promotes successful reentry to the community and lowers the likelihood of becoming involved with the criminal legal system in the future.

Right now, a part of what families pay the phone company is funneled right back to the prisons and jails, forcing economically vulnerable families to subsidize the cost of incarceration. The Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) and county sheriffs command ever-increasing budgets, even as overall rates of incarceration steadily decline. While some sheriffs have claimed they use the money to fund programs, such spending remains a tiny portion of correctional budgets.



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This injustice can be remedied at very low cost. A fiscal analysis by the organization Worth Rises projects that the state could provide free phone calls for every person in prison and jail for only \$3.4 million. That's a difference of \$11 million that families could be spending to meet their needs instead of enriching an out-of-state corporation.

Ending phone call exploitation advances racial justice. While only 27% of the state's population is Black or Latinx, people of color make up more than 54% of the people imprisoned by the DOC. Black and Latinx children are, respectively, nine and three times more likely than White children to have a parent in prison.



## IMPACT

An Act relative to telephone service for inmates in all correctional and other penal institutions in the Commonwealth and An Act to Keep Families Connected will:

- Provide telephone calls at no cost to all people in jail and prison in Massachusetts, including people held for ICE.
- Require that in prisons and jails that already provide tablets, calling must be made available on these tablets at no cost, if the tablets are capable of being used for calls.
- Ensure that other forms of communication that supplement telephone calls, such as electronic communication and video calls, are also provided at no cost.
- The Senate bill further establishes a Communications Access Trust Fund that replaces the current for-profit contract model with a system that reimburses DOC and sheriffs for calls made by incarcerated people. This bill also establishes reporting requirements to allow the Legislature and the public to monitor access to calls, video calls, and electronic messages, and monitoring of all telecommunications contracts.
- This legislation will advance racial justice, gender justice, immigrant justice, and economic justice for families in the Commonwealth.

## CONTACT

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