

# FACT SHEET



## No Cost Communication in Prison

**Problem:** Virginia's prisons charge excessive fees for phone calls, video calls and email communication creating a financial burden upon the family members of incarcerated people, despite known benefits to people who are incarcerated, their family members and public safety. One in three families with an incarcerated family member goes into debt to communicate with them. Access to phones is also causing people incarcerated to line up and tempers to flare when people cannot talk to their loved ones.

**Solution:** Pass a bill to provide no cost phone calls, video calls and emails to people incarcerated in Virginia's prisons and ensure reasonable access to phones, videoconferencing and emails. The bill will also expand access to phones and increase how many people can be on a person incarcerated call list. Senator Boysko is the bill patron.

**Benefits:** Ensuring that people incarcerated can regularly communicate with their families and support networks has significant benefits:

**Reduces financial burdens.** People who are incarcerated are disproportionately low-income. Families bear the brunt of the excessive fees. These fees are a regressive tax on the poor. Charging incarcerated persons or their families only exacerbates financial hardships.

**Makes prisons safer.** Studies have shown that increasing communication for people incarcerated reduces violent incidents by around 20 percent. This makes a better environment for those incarcerated and correction officers.

**Reduces recidivism.** Those who remain connected to family and friends do better when they return to the community and thus have lower rates of recidivism.

**Helps children.** The children of men and women incarcerated do better in school and are more engaged and well-behaved in school.

**Enhances public safety.** If returning citizens are more connected to families and communities, they will be less likely to recommit crimes. If their children do well in school, they too are less likely to get into trouble. The society at-large benefits.

**Virginia History:** Virginia has contracted with Global-Tel Link (GTL) for phone services since 2005. The pricing structure has changed over the years, eliminating the commission (kickback) that was given to the Department of Corrections and reducing the per minute fee. The current cost is \$.0409 per minute. Illinois, with a comparable prison population pays charges only \$.009 per minute (less than a fourth the cost). Four states, (California, Colorado, Connecticut and Minnesota) are already providing no-cost calls.

Virginia has contracted with Assisting Families of Inmates (AFOI) since 2016, to provide video calls for people incarcerated. AFOI subcontracts with GTL. Video calls are \$4 for a 20 minute call and \$10 for a 50-minute call. The profits from this subsidize AFOI's operations. Virginia could contract with a non-profit, Amealio, that offers video calling services at cost without a profit margin.

Virginia contracts with J-Pay for emails. Current rates range from \$.39 to \$.25 per email – to or from those incarcerated. Virginia receives a commission (kickback) on each email.

Virginia is seeking bids to provide tablets to people incarcerated. This is an opportunity to offer no-cost calls, video calls and emails to people incarcerated. Communication access should be considered a rehabilitative program. It would be likely be one of the most cost-effective programs offered to all people in custody.

*Sources: WorthRises, and 2022 Report from General Assembly created work group entitled Reduction Elimination of Costs and Fees Charged to Inmates in State Correctional Facilities.*