

Prison Policy Initiative Presentation on H. 294

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Vermont has the opportunity to join a trend in making phone calls free

- Since 2021, six states (and many municipalities) have made phone calls free for incarcerated people and their families
 - California
 - Colorado
 - Connecticut
 - Massachusetts
 - Minnesota
 - New York

When prison phone calls are made free, more people make phone calls

- Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Minnesota all saw large rises in prison phone calls after making phone calls free
- When San Francisco jail made phone calls free, overnight 41% increase in number of phone calls per person, and people spent 81% more time in communication with their families and support networks.

This is a good thing!

Phone calls are arguably the most critical lifeline between incarcerated people and their families

- 80% or more incarcerated people use the phone to contact their families.
- Phone calls have fewer logistical hurdles than visits, and is more immediate and personal than mail.

Phone calls strengthen family ties

- Studies show that parent-child relationships improve with weekly phone calls. (Haverkate, 2020)
- Phone calls are the most likely form of communication (compared to mail and visits) to be *consistent* – 76% of children who communicated with their mothers in prison by phone did so weekly, as opposed to 45% by mail and 31% by visit. (Haverkate, 2020)

Phone calls make prisons safer

- Incarcerated people who make telephone calls have reduced rates of verbal and physical assaults on staff, as well as fewer rule violations in general. (Solinas-Saunders, 2012)

Phone calls reduce recidivism

- In a 2014 study, women who had any phone contact with family members during incarceration were less likely to be re-incarcerated within 5 years. (Barrick et al, 2014)
- Phone calling has a larger impact on recidivism than visitation or mail, likely because of its frequency.
- Close family relationships and family support are associated with better employment outcomes and less substance use after release (Visher et. al, 2004)

Phone call payments usually come from families

- In a 2015 survey of incarcerated people and their families, 82% of survey participants reported that family were primarily responsible for telephone fees.
 - Of those family members, 87% were women
- 1 in 3 survey participants reported going into debt to cover phone and visitation costs.

(Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families, Sept 2015)

Crucial to also make e-messaging and video calling free

- Vermont currently charges *\$0.25 per message* for e-messaging and *\$0.16 per minute* for video calling. Obviously, these prices far exceed the prices on the outside.
- As texting and video become more and more central to the way we communicate, it becomes an opportunity for corporate interests to exploit the captive market of incarcerated people and their families.

Commissary Costs

Commissary is a requirement, not a luxury, for people in prisons.

- Prison food is often served in small portions and is sometimes inedible.
- The Prison Policy Initiative studied Massachusetts commissary prices – incarcerated people spent an average of \$940 yearly on food alone - \$1,207 total. (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018)
 - *(Massachusetts has the same commissary provider as Vermont)*
- Much of what is being bought is *not* snack food, but meals – almost half of commissary food spending was on ready-to-eat meals or ingredients.

Vermont has particularly high commissary costs

- A 2024 study by The Appeal found that Vermont had the highest cost for reading glasses in the country, at \$15 – 5 times the price it would be at Walgreens.
- It also had among the highest prices in the country for a representative food item (ramen noodles) at \$0.83 – in MA, NH, RI, and CT, that price is between \$0.42-\$0.55.

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