

Team Testimony Toolkit for S.1559 & H.1900

No Cost Calls

S.1559, An Act Relative to Inmate Telephone Calls
Presented by Senator Cynthia Stone Creem

H. 1900, An Act Relative to Telephone Service for Inmates in All
Correctional and Other Penal Institutions in the Commonwealth
Presented by Rep. Chynah Tyler, Vice Chair of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary

A hearing for H.1900 took place on **Tuesday, October 5, 2021** in front of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary.

We are keeping this toolkit available so that people can keep learning about the issue and advocate for the bills with their legislators.

BACKGROUND ON S.1559/H.1900: Summary of Bill

S.1559 /H.1900 would provide free phone calls, video calls, and other forms of electronic communication to people in all state prisons, county jails, and houses of corrections in Massachusetts.

What Would the Bill Do?

S.1559/H.1900 would:

- Remove the burden from incarcerated people and their families to pay for telephone calls and other communication services. The bill would let families stay connected for free.

No Cost Calls, S.1559/H.1900 Testimony Toolkit

- Stop the Department of Corrections (DOC) and sheriffs from using incarcerated individuals and their families to receive corrupt money. Currently, the DOC and sheriffs receive large “kickbacks” for entering into high cost phone plans with Securus Technologies, a private communications firm.
- End the practice of letting private companies like Securus profit off the telephone calls and video visitation services for incarcerated people in Massachusetts.

Why Was this Bill Introduced?

Currently, people incarcerated in Massachusetts and their families pay over \$25 million per year on calls [*note: with recently reduced rates, families pay over \$14 million per year – this is still too much*]. Under this scheme, the DOC and sheriffs receive \$7 million “kickbacks” for entering into higher cost contracts with the private phone company, Securus. The DOC, sheriffs, and Securus then exploit families by forcing them to pay \$0.14 per minute for telephone calls.

Incarcerated people and their families should not be a source of revenue for prisons and jails in Massachusetts. The sheriffs claim that the money made from phone calls is needed for programming, and although we have asked, sheriffs still haven’t told us exactly how much of this money is actually used for things like education and training. Services for incarcerated people should be coming from the state, NOT from the wallets of vulnerable families.

In the past, sheriffs had suggested cost-saving measures like closing units, adjusting staff ratios, reducing overtime pay, and leaving positions vacant when a staff member retires. These measures would cover the state's loss of the commissions from Securus. Yet, year after year, the DOC and sheriffs spend more of their legislated budget to increase their payroll and salaries instead of providing essential services like phone calls and video visits to incarcerated individuals and their families.

S.1559/H.1900 is a racial justice bill.

The criminal legal system is part of the systemic racism in the US. People of color are more likely to be incarcerated in Massachusetts, and Black and Brown children are

No Cost Calls, S.1559/H.1900 Testimony Toolkit

more likely than White children to have a parent who is incarcerated. In the current system, the burden of paying for calls is primarily on Black and Brown women.

S.1559/H.1900 reveals class inequities and familial, gender, and mental health realities:

Poor and low-income individuals and their families are burdened with the cost of telephone calls. These costs are devastating, and they put stress on families and on relationships. Often, family members have to choose between talking with a loved one who is incarcerated or paying for groceries and rent.

- One in three** families goes into debt to pay for the phone calls and other forms of communication to stay connected to an incarcerated family member.
- Over **5,500** children in Massachusetts are separated from their parents due to incarceration, and they count on phone calls to stay connected to an incarcerated parent.
- 80%** of incarcerated women in Massachusetts are mothers. When fathers are incarcerated, mothers and grandmothers usually carry the financial burden, including the cost of phone calls.

Studies show that incarcerated individuals' contact with loved ones helps them to reenter society and to remain out of the jail/prison system. In addition, contact with family and friends is critical for people's well-being. Telephone calls and other forms of communications are a lifeline for incarcerated people and their families. Jails and prisons are often in remote areas of Massachusetts, and during the ongoing pandemic, it is not possible or "safe" for family members to visit a loved one who is incarcerated.

HOW TO TESTIFY ABOUT S.1559/H.1900:

A legislative hearing can be intimidating, but it is your chance to tell your legislators what phone calls mean to you. If you register to speak at the October 21st hearing, you will probably receive a confirmation email.

No Cost Calls, S.1559/H.1900 Testimony Toolkit

This hearing will take place on Microsoft Teams. If you register to testify, you will receive a link by email from the Public Safety Committee. You can open the hearing in your Internet browser.

Please use a regular window, not a private window (sometimes Microsoft Teams will block your camera or microphone if you use a private window).

We don't know when during the day this bill will come up for testimony.

Testimony Tips:

- Legislators connect to personal stories. If you are incarcerated or make telephone calls to a friend or loved one who is incarcerated, please consider sharing your story. **What can only you say?**
- You have 2-3 minutes to testify. If you go over this time, the committee may stop you. You do not have to say a lot to make a big impact.
- If you know that your legislator is on the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security, you can tell her/him that you are a constituent.

Looking for more writing tips? Check out this resource [here](#).

Talking Points For Oral or Written Testimony:

If you are having trouble coming up with testimony, try answering these questions:

- Why are free telephone calls and electronic communications for incarcerated people in Massachusetts and their families important to you?
- What would free telephone calls and electronic communications mean for you, your family, or your friend?
- What is the current hardship for you and your family to stay connected?
- How would free calls and electronic communications change your life or make your life better?

Written Testimony for S.1559:

Written testimony to support S.1559 can be sent to Dave McNeill at david.mcneill@mahouse.gov and Cara Libman at cara.libman@masenate.gov.

Bcc NCCtestimony@googlegroups.com and CC your representative and senator!

Template for the Email to the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security:

Email Subject Line: Testimony in Support of S.1559, Keeping Families Connected/No Cost Calls Bills

Dear Senate Chair Timilty and House Chair Gonzalez:

I am writing in support of S.1559, An Act Relative to Inmate Telephone Calls.

Please write a few sentences about who you are and why you care about S.1559:

- Personal experiences are great!
- You can also write about corruption, social justice, racial justice, economics, or anything else that is important to you.
- You should also mention if you are a constituent of anyone on the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security. If you don't know who represents you, [the Mass Legislator Finder](#) may help!

Sincerely,

Your Full Name

Your Address

When you are done, feel free to share your thoughts on [social media](#)!

#NoCostCalls

#KeepingFamiliesConnected

#MaPoli

MORE INFO AND WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

[Sign our petition](#)

Watch and share these videos and fact sheet:

- ❖ [Keeping Families Connected Video 1](#)
- ❖ [Keeping Families Connected Video 2](#)
- ❖ [PRISONERS' LEGAL SERVICES 2021-2022 FACT SHEET](#)

No Cost Calls, S.1559/H.1900 Testimony Toolkit

If you have additional questions that were not answered by this toolkit or would like to find other ways to show your support for S.1559/H.1900, please contact NCCtestimony@googlegroups.com.