

## **The Keeping Families Connected / No Cost Calls Coalition Urges the Legislature to Make Prison Phone and Jail Phone Calls Free, Fully Funded, and Guaranteed in the MA FY23 Budget**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

**Boston – June 2, 2022** – After years of organizing, language ensuring free phone calls for people incarcerated in Massachusetts jails and prisons has passed in the House and Senate budgets for the first time. The Keeping Families Connected / No Cost Calls Coalition deeply thanks Sen. Creem, Rep. Tyler, and all the legislators and legislative staffers who have worked so diligently to move the policy this far. But we know there is more work to do.

**Going into the Conference Committee, affected families want legislators to know that the strongest No Cost Calls policy requires calls to be free, fully funded, and guaranteed.**

“We have worked around the country to make prison and jail communication free from California to Connecticut. Through this work, we have learned that a minimum guarantee of call time is critical to the successful implementation of such policies. Without such guarantee, the Legislature risks undermining its sincere intention to increase communication access for families and their incarcerated loved ones. Families need more than the Legislature’s intention, they need its protection,” said **Bianca Tylek**, executive director at Worth Rises.

Right now, Massachusetts jails and prisons don’t restrict how many minutes incarcerated people can talk to their loved ones on the phone each day. Calls are limited by what families can afford, and many [families go into debt](#) to stay connected. The Legislature must ensure that this current level of contact does not decrease once calls are free. This is a best practice in jurisdictions where the policy is already in place. For example, there are no limits on minutes in [San Francisco](#), and no problems have been reported. And as Senator Creem mentioned in her floor speech before the Senate adopted her budget amendment, the whole state of Connecticut guarantees minimum minutes to incarcerated people. Certain sheriffs have already confirmed that [they will impose new restrictions](#) on phone time in response to this policy change unless the Legislature guarantees access. We urge the Conference Committee to maintain the continuity of unlimited calls by barring any new caps on calls and to guarantee 120 minutes available to each person, each day.

"It may take more than one 20-minute call to get a full update on your mother's hospital stay and talk with your siblings about palliative care options, or to help your 10-year-old with her science homework, or to discuss the strategy on a complex motion for bail with your lawyer. And on some days, you might need to be able to do all three. Allowing the sheriffs and DOC to place new limits on calls will undermine the purpose behind this policy: keeping families connected. It's essential that as the Legislature removes the financial burden of these expensive calls, each person is guaranteed access to 120 minutes of calls per day, and the number of calls each person can make remains unrestricted, as it is right now," said **Katy Naples-Mitchell**, staff attorney at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice.

Our [families and friends](#) – some of the Commonwealth's most economically burdened taxpayers and residents – need this relief this year. We strongly support the House language creating a \$20M Trust Fund dedicated to communication services, which sheriffs and the DOC can access for reimbursement only after submitting proof of their quarterly spending on communication services. That Trust Fund should be in the final FY23 budget, to take effect this year.

“Incarcerated people and their loved ones are most vulnerable at the point of transitioning, from freedom to incarceration and beyond. Having telephone access to our families, loved ones, and children is an essential component to preserving family stability as well as overcoming the mental challenge of adjusting to being recently separated from each other,” said **Leslie Credle**, founder and executive director of Justice 4 Housing, Inc.

Last week certain sheriffs [misrepresented](#) their budgets, claiming that \$20M would not make up for their lost site commissions from phone calls. The Massachusetts Sheriffs’ Association’s own data shows that the sheriffs [receive \\$3.4M annually from site commissions](#), and sheriffs previously agreed that \$10M would cover free calls. An analysis by Coalition member Worth Rises estimated an even lower amount to be the annual cost to the state: \$8.2M. The sheriffs and the Department of Correction already receive a combined \$1.3 BILLION annually, and their budgets increase every year even as the incarcerated population [continues to decline](#). The \$20M Trust Fund, a revolving fund that will preserve any unspent resources for reimbursement in future years, will more than cover the annual cost of making communication services free for affected families.

“We hope the Conference Committee will rise to protect the spirit of No Cost Calls: to truly keep our families connected, calls should be free, fully funded, and guaranteed. We can’t let phone access *decrease* as a result of passing this historic legislation to lift up some of the Commonwealth’s most vulnerable families,” said **Bonnie Tenneriello**, senior attorney at Prisoners’ Legal Services of Massachusetts.

*For more information, please contact Aaron Steinberg at [asteinberg@plsma.org](mailto:asteinberg@plsma.org).*

The No-Cost Calls/Keeping Families Connected Coalition is a coalition of over [60 organizations](#) that endorse this policy, including Black and Pink MA, the Massachusetts Bar Association, Prisoners’ Legal Services of Massachusetts, GLAD, Justice 4 Housing, and Families for Justice as Healing.

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