

Keeping Families Connected Coalition

FAQs on Jail and Prison Call Procedures in Massachusetts

Q: How does access to telephones work now, and how would unlimited free calls or a guaranteed number of minutes of free calls affect this?

A: People usually line up and take turns during the blocks of time that are available for calls. At some prisons, they use a signup book. The contracting phone companies limit the calls to 15 or 20 minutes each. When the time runs out, the call automatically ends. Typically when a call ends, that person gives the phone to the next person in line. People are already used to going to the end of the line after their call is finished and waiting to make another call, or deciding to come back later. None of the budget proposals under consideration would require prisons or jails to change this mode of operation.

Q: Would unlimited free calls or a guaranteed number of minutes of free calls interfere with programming or education?

A: No. Telephones are typically accessed when people have free time in their housing units or the outdoor “yard.” Those few who are lucky enough to have access to validated programming and/or education that results in credits to reduce their sentence are not likely to sacrifice “good time” in order to talk with loved ones during class time. And Section 68 of the Senate's budget language--which we propose the Legislature adopt--specifically provides that each individual, “shall have access to voice communication services . . . to the extent that such access does not interfere with rehabilitative, educational or vocational programming or routine facility procedures.”

Q: What equipment is needed to support calls?

A: Many Sheriffs' Departments allow tablets to be used for calls or are making the transition to tablets. DOC permits tablets but does not currently permit the use of tablets for calls. Many housing units in DOC have at least one telephone that is out of commission at any time. As more individuals use their own tablets, any operational concerns regarding phone use will largely become moot. At the moment, however, the quality of service can vary, and Wifi does not reach all housing units.

Q: Would unlimited free calls or a guaranteed number of minutes of free calls increase call volume to a point that cannot be accommodated by current infrastructure?

A: No. Data and modeling from the organization Worth Rises, based on jurisdictions where free calls have been implemented, show that people use on average about 30 minutes per day. This average includes both people who do not speak at all on a given day, and those who need substantially more than 30 minutes due, for example, to parenting responsibilities or a family or legal crisis. Each jurisdiction that has adopted free calls has successfully managed infrastructure-related implementation issues.