

‘A slap in the face’: The state slashed funding for free prison and jail calls, raising concerns

By **Matt Stout** Globe Staff, Updated August 26, 2024, 7:12 a.m.



Many of those incarcerated in Department of Correction prisons can use state-issued tablets to make phone calls to relatives and loved ones. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Months after the state made phone conversations free for incarcerated people, the number of calls has doubled in state prisons, heartening advocates who long pushed to shift a [heavy financial burden](#) off families.

Quickly, however, a new concern has surfaced: The state has slashed the money intended to pay for it.

The [state budget that lawmakers passed](#), and Governor Maura Healey [signed last month](#) provides \$10 million to cover the costs of those now-free phone calls, just half of what the Legislature allocated for the launch of the initiative in December.

That initial \$20 million is expected to cover the first eight months of free calls after the law took effect. Should phone usage remain steady or continue growing, the \$10 million allocation likely won't meet demand this fiscal year, prompting one sheriff to warn that correction officials may have to restrict, or eliminate, phone access to rein in the rising tab.

"If that money doesn't come back to us, then I have to make a decision. The phones may get turned off," said Hampden Sheriff Nicholas Cocchi, the president of the Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association. Sheriffs oversee the county jails and correctional facilities, while the state runs the prisons.

"The Massachusetts sheriffs, we are committed to doing the right thing. We are committed to following and enforcing the statute. We just are frustrated," said Cocchi, a Ludlow Democrat. "They ponied up money [with the initial \$20 million], but it just wasn't enough. The fact they cut it again, to me, that's just a slap in the face."

Advocates, family members, and others [for years pushed to make the calls free](#), arguing that families were being gouged by high prices and that public entities that collected a share of the payments were profiting off a vulnerable population. When Healey signed the law last year, Massachusetts became the fifth state to make prison calls free and the first to make county jail calls free.

Legislative leaders said Friday they are committed to funding the new law, which is designed to provide "[unlimited free phone calls](#)" to those in Massachusetts jails and prisons.

House Speaker Ron Mariano left open the potential of providing an infusion of money in a supplemental spending bill.

And, Senate President Karen E. Spilka indicated lawmakers intend to eventually include money in the sheriffs' and Department of Correction's operating budgets to cover no-cost calls; currently, they have set aside [cash in a separate fund](#).

“Ensuring that people who are incarcerated can contact loved ones is a moral imperative and a statutory obligation,” said Gray Milkowski, a Spilka spokesperson. “We are committed to working with the [Healey] administration and the House to ensure seamless delivery of the program for this year, and every year to come.”

Aides to Healey, who initially sought \$35 million to cover costs this fiscal year, said it’s likely they will have to seek more money from the Legislature in the coming months. Under [state law](#), her administration is required to make payments to prison and jail officials each quarter.

The House had proposed \$35 million in its budget, while the Senate did not provide any money for this fiscal year to cover the costs. In a budget agreement passed last month, the chambers settled at \$10 million.

Complicating matters: Officials are unsure exactly how much will be needed. When lawmakers passed the law mandating no-cost calls, incarcerated people and their families were charged anywhere from 12 cents a minute for in-state calls at state facilities to 14 cents at most county jails, according to state and county data. A single 20-minute phone call cost close to \$3 in many cases, and families said a video call could cost \$5.

Department of Correction officials said they have since negotiated an amended deal with its phone provider, Securus, cutting the per-minute rate to 8 cents. Scott Croteau, a department spokesperson, said the contract runs through 2028.

Cocchi said his office has also sought to lower costs and now pays less than 2 cents per minute for calls from the Hampden County facility.

Advocates and lawmakers, however, have urged the state to go further and solicit a new contract entirely, covering both sheriffs and the Department of Correction, in a bid to further drive down costs.

“Part of the reason this law was passed was to reduce that exploitation, not just shift it” to the state, said Jesse White, policy director of Prisoners’ Legal Services. “I think it’s incumbent on the Legislature to fully fund the law. But I also think it’s incumbent upon the commonwealth to make sure these companies aren’t profiteering for no good reason.”

Overall, the number of calls have soared. In November — the month before the law took effect — there were 345,310 calls at Department of Correction facilities; that spiked to more than 500,000 in December, and by May, there were more than 760,000, state data show.

Jarelis Miranda, 31, said she was spending “at a minimum” \$300 to \$500 a month to speak several times a day with her husband, Paulino Miranda, who is serving a sentence of 15 years to life at MCI-Norfolk.

“It took a big chunk of my monthly budget,” Jarelis Miranda said. “It’s nice to know if he hangs up one phone call, we don’t have to do the stutter step of [figuring out] how much money we have left on the account.”

Joanna Levesque, whose boyfriend, Christopher O’Connor, is serving a 16-year sentence at Old Colony Correctional Center, said she often had to choose between paying rent and gassing up her car, or calling him most days.

“Now there are some days we talk three times,” she said. Without enough funding, she fears officials could begin curtailing how many calls each person can make or the hours they’re allowed. Currently, those incarcerated in state facilities can typically make calls between 8 a.m. and 9:30 p.m., state officials said.

“Yes, people are incarcerated,” Levesque said, “but they’re still humans and they deserve to have basic human rights, to be able to talk with their loved ones and have a relationship with their loved ones.”

Senator Jamie Eldridge, a Marlborough Democrat who co-chairs the Legislature’s judiciary committee, said lawmakers often include additional funding for sheriff departments in smaller spending bills later in the year.

Eldridge, however, warned against sheriffs or state officials unilaterally limiting phone calls to family members without more funding, saying the no-cost calls program has proven “incredibly successful.”

“That,” he said, “is violating the letter of the law.”

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