



Incarceration

Support Voiced For Free Inmate Calls, But Who Will Pay?

by Lisa Backus

March 23, 2021

Matthew Abraham didn't get to share in his family's grief over the loss of his grandmother because his mother's phone account with the prison ran out of money minutes after she died, said a relative, Jeanne Fu.

The inmate also didn't get a chance to say goodbye to his mother before her death weeks later, because replenishing the phone account cost too much, Fu said.

"I never got a chance to speak to my mother again," Fu said, reading testimony Abraham submitted to the Judiciary Committee. Advocates, including state agencies that deal with inmates and incarcerated youth, turned out in force for a virtual public hearing Monday to support SB 972, which would make phone calls, emails and video visits to prison free as of Oct. 1, 2022.

Connecticut has some of the nation's highest rates for prison phone calls, largely due to the 68% commission the state gets on all in-state calls, according to Worth Rises, an advocacy group that was successful in getting free calls to and from New York City jails. The cost of the calls, which averages about \$4.50 for 15 minutes, falls largely on women, particularly Black women, since people of color make up about 72% of the prison population, the organization said.

Under a contract with the state Department of Administrative Services, the prison phone vendor, Securus Technologies, pulls in about \$13 million a year for phone calls to and from the prisons. Of that, the commission nets the state about \$7 million annually, with the bulk of the money going to the judicial branch and the Criminal Justice Information System. The Department of Correction receives \$350,000 of the commission for inmate programming.

The judicial branch "fully endorses" the effort to eliminate the fees, according to testimony submitted by its external affairs division. But Gov. Ned Lamont has only offered \$1 million to offset the \$3.2 million that would evaporate if the bill passes, the branch said. The judicial branch uses the money to fund 28 probation officers in a unit that helps prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from violating probation. It says it needs another \$2.2 million in the budget to keep the officers and also provide free inmate communication.

"The impact of losing these staff members would not only impact the judicial branch, but the criminal justice community as well," according to the testimony. The \$1 million Lamont offered in his 2022-2023 budget reduced the cost of the calls by four cents to \$.19 a minute as of July 1.

State Correction Commissioner Angel Quiros said negotiation of a new contract has not begun, but that he would support a reduction in the cost of the calls. The problem is that the state should never have become reliant on the money, said Rep. Josh Elliott, D-Hamden, who has championed free inmate phone calls for three years.

"We all agree — well, most of us agree — that the state should not be hyper-targeting fees for folks who are incarcerated for services that the state should be providing," Elliott said.

The cost of inmate phone calls could be in range of a penny a minute without the "kickback," Elliott said. "If you agree that the state should not be taking kickbacks, then you agree the state should be essentially chipping in to pay for those judicial officers, those probation officers," Elliott said.

The high cost of the calls is not only impacting people like Jewu Richardson, the co-director of the Connecticut Bail Fund, who couldn't afford to call his daughter on her seventh birthday. "I was afraid my daughter was going to get used to not hearing from me on her birthday," Richardson said.

It's also affecting the ability of young men and women to plan for a future beyond the prison walls, advocates said.

“The high cost of phone calls is hurting young people’s ability to plan for re-entry,” said Adam Yagaloff, staff attorney for the Center for Children’s Advocacy.

Youth who are incarcerated need to line up housing arrangements, school enrollment and medication and mental health services before they are released, Yagaloff said. “Some youth are only able to talk to their families for five minutes a month, for some it’s even less.”

Connections to outside family and friends are the top prevention for recidivism, said Brian Sullivan, who was imprisoned for 31 years and is now a leader in the American Civil Liberties Union Smart Justice Campaign. “I spent many years not being able to speak to family because the cost was too high,” Sullivan said.

The bill also has the support of state Child Advocate Sarah Eagan, the Division of Public Defender Services, and Senate President Martin Looney, D-New Haven.

“Facilitating inmates’ ability to remain in contact with family members is not only beneficial to them while they are incarcerated, it assists them when they make the transition back into society, which benefits us all,” Looney said. “The state should not use inmate calls or other inmate communication as a profit center.”