



Bianca Tylek  
Executive Director  
btylek@worthrises.org

85 Delancey St., 2<sup>nd</sup> Fl.  
New York, NY 10002  
www.worthrises.org  
@worthrises

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Senator Meghan Kallman  
93 Capwell Avenue  
Pawtucket, RI 02860

Representative Leonela Felix  
195 Carter Avenue  
Pawtucket, RI 02861

**RE: Fiscal impact of free communication for incarcerated people**

Dear Senator Meghan Kallman and Representative Leonela Felix,

We, at Worth Rises, want to applaud you for introducing a bill which would connect families by making prison communication free. We are writing today to provide an expert analysis of the fiscal impact this policy would have on the current budget.

Worth Rises is a non-profit organization working to end the exploitation of incarcerated people and their loved ones. We are a leader in the prison phone justice space at the federal, state, and local level, and have helped pass and implement policies in Colorado, Connecticut, California, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, and Miami to make prison and jail phone calls free. We have built models based on the data we have gathered from prisons and jails across the country that allow us to support administrators and lawmakers with critical fiscal analyses.

**Based on our analysis, we project that providing fully free communication across Rhode Island state prisons would cost the state as little as \$436,000 annually, while saving Rhode Island families \$1.1 million.** Below please find our detailed fiscal analysis for this proposed policy, which we hope is helpful to you as you continue to advocate for phone justice for the tens of thousands of Rhode Island residents directly impacted by incarceration. Please feel free to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

Bianca Tylek  
Executive Director

## DATA & ASSUMPTIONS

Our findings are based on the following assumptions:

**Population.** For this analysis, we use the average daily population as of 2024, or 2,346, across the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (DOC).

**Current spending.** For this analysis, we estimate annual spending based on 2022 phone call, video call, and electronic messaging data as provided by the DOC.

**Commissions.** The DOC does not collect revenue from the sale of communications services.

## PHONE CALLS

Incarcerated people and their loved ones are currently charged \$0.029 per minute for prison phone calls in Rhode Island.<sup>1</sup> However, for this analysis, we assume that DOC would renegotiate rates in line with other progressive states and counties that have prioritized affordability by assuming this cost directly. We also assume that DOC would be interested in exploring new innovative cost structures for providing communications services.

- **Option 1: Per minute model.** There are more competitive rates offered by all the leading prison telecom providers. For example, families pay a per minute rate of \$0.009 in Illinois, \$0.012 in New Hampshire, \$0.012 in Dallas, \$0.014 in Colorado, \$0.016 in California, and \$0.020 in Ohio and Mississippi. For this analysis, we assume that if DOC continues with a per minute compensation structure, it would secure a rate of \$0.01 per minute.

Our elasticity model accounts for changes in call volume based on changes in rates. We use this model to account for the increase in volume expected when rates fall to zero as the proposed policy would require. Traditionally calling services are provided over wall phones. For this analysis, we use the average per person per day call time from all jurisdictions that have implemented free calling over phones to date, or 28.2 minutes. However, calling services are being increasingly provided using individual tablets. Thus, for this analysis, we use the average per person per day call time from all jurisdictions that have implemented free calling using tablets to date, or 43.4 minutes. States that have done this include California, where use is 42.9 minutes per person per day, and Connecticut, where use is 44.0 minutes per person per day.

- **Option 2 – Per device model.** In recent years, corrections agencies have been exploring new compensation structures which better reflect modern day technology. Per device models allow agencies to have predictable monthly expenses, based on the number of phones or tablets in the

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<sup>1</sup> We note that recently passed federal regulations prohibit prisons from passing through most security and surveillance costs to incarcerated people and their loved ones through rates. As such, while the current rate charged in Rhode Island is below the new federal rate caps, the cost of these services will still have to be removed, paid for directly by the state, and rates adjusted downward irrespective of the proposed legislation. We do not account for this shift in security and surveillance costs herein, though it would lower the fiscal impact.

facility, and not based on the variable number of call minutes. With a per device model, call volume does not affect the cost of the policy and thus it can better aligns with the intention to increase communication.

- ***Per phone.*** One of these innovative models was pioneered by the San Francisco Sheriff's Department and is based on a per phone line basis, whereby the agency pays a monthly fee per phone line. While the San Francisco Sheriff's Department pays \$89.78 per phone line per month, since it pioneered this model in 2021, new procurement processes have already produced rates as low as \$49 per phone line per month. For this analysis, we base our estimate on 358 phones across all facilities, a figure provided by DOC, and a monthly per phone line rate of \$49.

***Per tablet.*** Another compensation structure was recently explored by the Connecticut Department of Correction, which negotiated a per tablet model whereby the agency pays a monthly fee per tablet. The Connecticut Department of Correction pays \$30 per tablet per month for unlimited international and domestic calling on tablets. To date, Connecticut is the only state to adopt a per tablet model, and it did so without a competitive bidding process, as such we do not consider its rate to be competitive and do not include this model in our analysis.

## VIDEO CALLS

Incarcerated people and their families are charged \$0.25 per minute for video calls in Rhode Island. There are more competitive rates offered by all the leading prison telecom providers. For example, in Arizona, families pay \$0.03 per minute and a provider offered Virginia a rate of \$0.10 per minute in recent bids. Further, the Federal Communications Commission recently set interim rate caps for video calls as low as \$0.11. For this analysis, we assume that the DOC would secure a rate of \$0.05 per minute.

Historically, the average use of video calls has been 11.8 minutes per month according to data provided by the DOC. This is a high estimate that assumes every video call lasted the full allowable length of 20 minutes, which is quite rare. In 2023, Massachusetts began offering free video calls in all state prisons as required by law, similar to the legislation proposed here, and the average use of video calls was 39.8 minutes per person per month. Accordingly, for this analysis, we assume an average of 39.8 minutes per person per month.

***Free alternatives.*** In recent years, corrections agencies have been exploring alternative methods of providing video calls that are more cost-efficient and better reflect the state of video calling in the free world. For example, agencies like the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services provide access to free video calls through Zoom and Microsoft Teams. While not incorporated in this analysis, we highly recommend considering these options for video calling for incarcerated people, which would have no cost at all.

## ELECTRONIC MESSAGES

Incarcerated people and their families are charged as much as \$0.25 per stamp to send an electronic message in Rhode Island. Every electronic message requires a stamp, and message attachments, such as images or videos, require additional stamps, which can quickly drive up the cost of electronic messages. For this analysis, we assume that the DOC would renegotiate rates in line with other progressive states and counties that have prioritized affordability by assuming this cost directly. We also assume that the DOC would be interested in exploring new innovative cost structures for providing communications services.

- **Option 1 – Per message.** There are more competitive rates offered by all the leading prison telecom providers. For example, in Maine, all families receive 10 monthly electronic messages for free and can pay \$0.025 for each additional message. In California, families pay a per message rate of \$0.05 for all message types. For this analysis, we assume that if DOC continues with a per message structure, we assume it would secure a rate of \$0.03 per message.

According to data provided by the DOC, in 2023, 0.8 electronic messages were sent per person per day. We know that when Connecticut made electronic messages free, incarcerated people sent and received on average a total of 5.4 messages per person per day. For this analysis, we assume an average of 5.4 messages per person per day.

- **Option 2 – Per person.** In recent years, corrections agencies have been exploring new compensation structures to provide communications services that better reflect modern day technology. For example, the Connecticut Department of Corrections negotiated a per tablet compensation structure to implement unlimited electronic messaging access on tablets. Connecticut pays \$15 per tablet per month for unlimited electronic messaging on tablets. To date, Connecticut is the only state to adopt a per tablet model, and it did so without a competitive bidding process, as such we do not consider its rate to be competitive and do not include this model in our analysis.

## ANALYSIS

**Making prison communications free would save Rhode Island families \$1.1 million each year.**

- **Rates.** Today, Rhode Island residents are paying \$0.029 per minute for phone calls, \$0.25 per minute for video calls, and \$0.25 per stamp for electronic messages. The proposed policy would make all prison communications free for incarcerated people and their families.
- **Service costs.** Rhode Island residents pay the state's prison telecom vendors \$906,000 to communicate with incarcerated loved ones in prison annually, before taxes and fees.
- **Deposit fees.**<sup>2</sup> The state's prison telecom vendor also collects additional fees, including an account funding fee of \$3 per transaction (capped at \$50). With a national average deposit of \$17, the account funding fees alone are estimated to cost families an additional \$160,000 annually.

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<sup>2</sup> New federal regulations bar prison telecom providers from charging these fees.

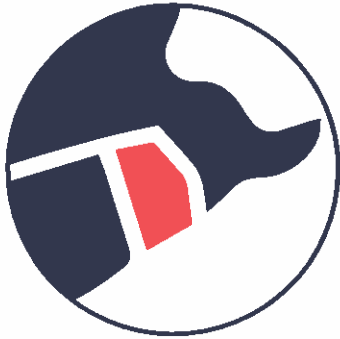
- ***Taxes and other fees.*** Families also pay an estimated \$68,000 annually in other government fees and taxes, including the Federal Universal Service Fund assessed on interstate calls.

**The fiscal impact of free prison communications on the state budget would be between \$436,000 and \$566,000 annually.**

- ***Commissions.*** Rhode Island does not collect commission on prison communications and thus there is no loss of revenue associated with this policy.
- ***Phone calls.*** The cost of providing free phone calls in Rhode Island prisons would be based on the compensation structure as follows:
  - \$279,000 for a per phone line compensation model,
  - \$242,000 for a per minute compensation model deployed over wallphones, or
  - \$372,000 for a per minute compensation model deployed over individualized tablets.
- ***Video Calls.*** The cost of providing free video calls in Rhode Island prisons would be \$56,000 for a per minute compensation model.
- ***Electronic messaging.*** The cost of providing free electronic messaging in Rhode Island prisons would be \$139,000 for a per message compensation model.

# RHODE ISLAND

## PRISON AND JAIL COMMUNICATION COSTS



Correctional agencies contract with prison telecom corporations to provide communication services to incarcerated people and their support networks. Today, the national average cost of a 15-minute call is \$1.01 from prison and \$2.17 from jail. In most states, incarcerated people are also charged for video calls and electronic messages. Due to meager wages paid in prisons and jails, if any, the cost of staying in touch falls largely on families. Nationally, one in three families with an incarcerated loved one falls into debt trying to staying connected. Incarcerated people whose families cannot afford these communication service are often cut off entirely, with grave consequences for their reentry success and public safety. Rhode Island is one of six states that do not have local or county jails, and instead use a "unified" corrections system in which the state administers facilities that hold people with both pretrial and sentenced statuses.

### PRISONS

#### Phone Calls

**\$0.44** Cost of a 15-minute call from prison

#### E-Messages

**\$0.25** Cost of an e-message in prison

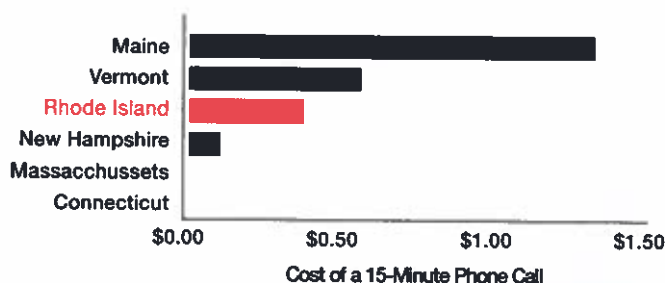
#### Video Calls

**\$5.00** Cost of a 20-minute video call from prison

#### Telecom Provider

**SECURUS**  
Technologies

The cost of calls from prison in Rhode Island is among **the highest in the region**. Two of Rhode Island's neighboring states, Connecticut and Massachusetts, provide free phone calls to incarcerated people.



With wages as low as **\$0.29 per hour**, most incarcerated people in Rhode Island have to work **1.5 hours** to afford a phone call with loved ones.

