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TESTIMONY OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER REGARDING:

House Bill No. 8117

**ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATED TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT--
CORRECTIONS DEPARTMENT**

Chairwoman Hagan McEntee and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

The Office of the Public Defender **strongly supports** House Bill 8117, which recognizes the importance of allowing individuals in correctional facilities to maintain contact with loved ones. Specifically, this bill seeks to repeal measures allowing the Department of Corrections to charge inmates for phone calls, instead mandating the provision of free communication services to inmates and juveniles held in detention centers. In addition, we applaud the bill's requirement that increases the number of phones available to inmates. Unfortunately, we have heard all too often about our clients not being able to access phones because of scarcity of the phones or lack of funds.

The ability to communicate freely with loved ones is a fundamental right that should not be impeded because a person is indigent. Communication plays an essential role in maintaining familial bonds, fostering rehabilitation, and facilitating successful reintegration into society upon release. However, the imposition of fees for phone calls disproportionately burdens already marginalized individuals and undermines their ability to stay connected with their support networks.

By ensuring access to these important modes of communication, this bill aligns with principles of fairness, dignity, and rehabilitation. The Office of the Public Defender urges passage of H8117.

Sincerely,

/s/ Angela M. Yingling

Angela M. Yingling

Legislative Liaison

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