PVD

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Hon. Carol Hagan McEntee, Chair, House Committee on the Judiciary
et al. Sitting Committee Members, Rhode Island General Assembly

Amnesty International USA Local Group 1016
ITEM: H8117
POSITION: SUPPORT

To The Esteemed Members of the House Committee on Judiciary,

Thank you for considering House Bill 8117, which seeks to create a lifeline between those of our neighbors who find themselves incarcerated, and their communities, families and loved ones. This legislation comes in part directly from members of the affected community. In our state, we maintain democracy in spite of the tendency of other places to restrict freedom of speech, freedom to petition the government, and the franchise of voting rights, where they collide with the criminal justice system. Simply stated, in Rhody we do not seek to punish people beyond the sentences they are given by a Judge. This bill, when it is law, will be one more instance of legislation that arose from the needs and voices of people who are or have been “inside.”

Members of Amnesty International USA local group 1016 have experienced family members becoming involved in the criminal justice system–as occurs in many families in our state. We can attest to the difference it makes when someone is behind the walls in a facility such as Bristol County, MA, where they are free to make a phone call without paying an access fee first, and the phone simply rings; versus when their beloved relation has to first put credit on their inmate number, or calls ring through “collect” or pending charges. If the family member cannot pay for the call, an automated recording simply cuts off the call. The window slams closed on what at first seemed like a ray of sunshine. In effect, phone call access charges amount to fines and fees over and above the inmate’s court-sentenced restitution. It is time to end this onerous burden on our inmate populations and their families. Let them do their time and pay their debt; let’s stop increasing the misery and punishment attached to their rehabilitation.

The lifeline of communication is real on both ends of the phone call. A person’s entire family and community have not been sentenced. That is how we treat them when we fine everyone like this. When this bill is passed, Rhode Island will be a kinder place for all residents, outside or in.

Amnesty International PVD strongly urges the committee to consider this bill favorably and send it to the House floor recommending passage.