STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

Department of Corrections

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The Honorable Carol Hagan McEntee
House Committee on Judiciary
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

March 24, 2026

Re: H8117 – Relating to State Affairs and Government-- Corrections Department

Dear Chairperson McEntee:

This evening the House Committee on Judiciary will consider House Bill #8117. This bill would repeal RIGL § 42-56-38.1 and require the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) to provide free communication services to inmates and juveniles held in residential placement or detention centers. It would also require such facilities to provide in-person contact visits. Although the Department supports the legislative intent of this bill, there are several factors that must be thoughtfully considered.

States that have instituted free communication policies for the incarcerated population have encountered two distinct challenges upon implementation: increased usage leading to far higher than projected fiscal cost, and additional needed resources required to safely monitor phone calls. On December 1, 2025, The Boston Herald reported the cost of this initiative statewide in Massachusetts is about $12.5 million per year. According to an NBC 10 report from November 5, 2025, the cost to taxpayers for phone calls made by incarcerated persons residing at a single jail, the Bristol County Jail and House of Correction, is approximately $2 million a year. In Rhode Island in 2025, our vendor Securus Technologies, collected just over $795,000 from incarcerated persons for all calls and video visits, up from $666,000 in 2024, accounting for a total of 2,542,786 calls made. Secured messaging through the utilization of tablets is also included in this legislation. These numbers are likely to significantly increase if this bill were to pass.

Correctional systems across the country have had to increase their staffing capacity to monitor phone calls made by the incarcerated population and keep up with the volume. Beyond additional staffing, improved technologies with word detection have been necessary to keep pace with demonstrated examples of expanding criminal activity. To ensure the safety of our staff, those entrusted to our care and the general public, Rhode Island will need to invest in such technologies ahead of any such implementation. Failure to do so will be a risk to the safety and security of all.

Rhode Island is already a leader in the United States with one of the lowest rates charged for phone calls made by incarcerated persons. Calls made from the wall units in the housing units and yards may not exceed 20 minutes and cost incarcerated persons $0.029 per minute for interstate and intrastate telephone calls, and $0.41 per minute for international calls. Calls from the tablets have no time restriction other

than the black out times of count and overnight lockdown from 8:45 p.m. to 8:30 a.m., with the cost being $0.029 per minute for interstate and intrastate telephone calls, and $0.41 per minute for international calls. Video calls cost $4 per 20-minute session and $5 per 30-minute session. The Department provides two free 20-minute phone calls per incarcerated individual per month and one free 20-minute video session per month per incarcerated individual, with both offered to the entire population. In 2025, RIDOC moved to tablets that included individualized access to phone calls through the utilization of inmate tablets that are issued to the population. The introduction of this tablet feature has made a notable difference in reducing the number of fights between the incarcerated population. This feature has been well received by both the incarcerated population and correctional officers. Rather than waiting at for the phones in one's cellblock or in the yard, incarcerated persons may now make calls from the privacy of their own cells. This latest example demonstrates the Department's commitment to maintaining family ties and access to loved ones.

The language requiring RIDOC to provide "persons in their custody and confined in their facilities with in-person contact visits" is overly broad and does not consider the variety of security concerns that may preclude an incarcerated person from the privilege of such visit or necessitate a suspension of visits at a particular facility or systemwide. Health emergencies, violence, disciplinary history, public safety, and individuals under investigation are all circumstances in which in-person contact visits may not be permitted on a case-by-case basis. Visits are an important management tool used in consideration of the safety and security of the incarcerated population, staff, and approved visitors alike. Each facility warden determines the facility's visiting schedule including the day and time for visits, the location and length of visits, the number of weekly visits per inmate and the number of visitors an inmate may have at any one visit. Restrictions on visitation are a last resort, and we remain committed to facilitating safe, in-person visitation. Eliminating the potential for this dangerous unintended consequence was discussed in previous years, and we remain thankful to the sponsors for working with the Department to remove the language to address this safety concern.

Finally, this legislation allows for RIDOC to supplement voice communication with other communication services, which would come at an additional cost. For example, in 2024, more than $30,000 was spent by the incarcerated population on postage. It is also unclear if there would be any limit on the number of calls, video visits, and postage.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this legislation.

Sincerely,

Wayne T. Salisbury Jr.
Director

cc: Honorable Members of the House Committee on Judiciary
The Honorable Leonela Felix
Nicole McCarty, Esq., Chief Legal Counsel to the Speaker of the House