



**Testimony in favor of HB23-1133 to provide free communications for people incarcerated in Colorado prisons and juvenile detention facilities and their support networks**

*May 1, 2023*

Dear Chair Pete Lee, Vice Chair Julie Gonzales, and the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Bianca Tylek, and I am the Executive Director of Worth Rises, a national non-profit dedicated to ending the exploitation of people impacted by incarceration. I submit this testimony in support of House Bill 23-1133 to make communications free in state prisons and juvenile detention facilities, along with an issue fact sheet and coalition letter.

Thank you for taking time to hear from the public on the impact of prison communication costs. I hope you take particular note of the stories of those who have been directly impacted by incarceration and how the exorbitant cost of communication has weighed on their lives. I will focus my testimony, instead, on the policy and fiscal considerations that support this legislation.

At Worth Rises, we have helped jurisdictions across the country pass and implement policies that make communication free for incarcerated people and their support networks, including California, Connecticut, New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Miami, and still others. And we are currently supporting similar campaigns in over a dozen state and counties. Thus, we know what it takes to implement this policy and are committed to helping Colorado do so.

With this legislation, Colorado has the opportunity to join these other jurisdictions on the forefront of the national movement to provide overdue relief to millions of families with incarcerated loved ones by simply making communication free.

Today, **Colorado families pay the state's prison telecom vendor an estimated \$8.8 million each year to speak to their incarcerated loved ones.** This money comes directly from the parents, children, spouses, siblings, grandparents, friends, and others supporting incarcerated Coloradans. Families are often forced to choose between paying for basic necessities housing and food and paying to hear the voices of their incarcerated loved ones. In fact, one in three families with an incarcerated loved one goes into debt trying to stay connected, and 87% of those bearing this enormous financial burden are women.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Saneta deVuono-powell, Chris Schweidler, Alicia Walters, and Azadeh Zohrabi. *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*. Oakland, CA: Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design, 2015. <http://whopaysreport.org/who-pays-full-report/>

By contrast, based on our prior work, **we estimate that it would cost the state as little as \$1.7 million to provide all those in its custody and their families across Colorado with free communications.** Not only is this figure a fraction of what families are currently paying, but they also pale in comparison to what the state spends on its correctional system each year and would return so much more.

The support that families provide their incarcerated loved ones can change how successful a person is both during and after their incarceration. It increases hope, reduces desperation, and encourages positive behavior, which in turn reduces violence and improves the correctional environment for incarcerated people and correctional officers alike. One study showed that verbal and physical assaults decrease by 20% when incarcerated people have regular calls<sup>2</sup> and rule violations decrease by 27% when those calls are with their children.<sup>3</sup>

Further, incarcerated people who maintain connection with their family, community, and support network during their incarceration have a better chance at successfully reentering the community upon release. With their families help, they are more likely to secure housing and employment and generally have transition support. This increased success also translates into lower recidivism and increased public safety.<sup>4</sup> The Minnesota DOC's study of video calls showed a decrease of more than 20% in recidivism across crimes, including violent offenses.<sup>5</sup>

In closing, providing free prison communication would lift a critical burden off the shoulders of Colorado families across the state and help bolster the financial and emotional wellness of all Coloradans, especially those who are most marginalized. Free communications will make our communities and correctional facilities safer and reduce the future carceral costs. Thank you for your consideration.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B Tylek', written in a cursive style.

Bianca Tylek  
Executive Director

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<sup>2</sup> Solinas-Saunders, Monica, and Melissa J. Stacer. "Prison Resources and Physical/Verbal Assault in Prison: A Comparison of Male and Female Inmates." *Victims & Offenders* 7, no. 3 (July 2012): 279–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2012.685218>.

<sup>3</sup> Jiang, Shanhe, and L. Thomas Winfree. "Social Support, Gender, and Inmate Adjustment to Prison Life: Insights From a National Sample." *The Prison Journal* 86, no. 1 (2006): 32–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885505283876>.

<sup>4</sup> Wong, Leah. "Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families." Prison Policy Initiative, 2021. [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact/](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/).

<sup>5</sup> See FN 2.



May 2023

Colorado General Assembly  
200 E Colfax Avenue  
Denver, CO 80203

Dear Colorado state legislators,

For years, Colorado families have had to make unconscionable decisions to afford to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones. Despite years of pleas for help, Colorado families continue to have to penny pinch just so a child can hear the soothing sound of their parent’s voice for a few minutes. Colorado families need our leaders to take a stand — it is long past due.

**We, the undersigned coalition of directly impacted and allied organizations, urge the Colorado legislature to pass House Bill 1133 to stop charging families for prison communication.**

Every year, Colorado families pay the state’s private telecom vendor over \$8.8 million to talk to their incarcerated loved ones. Many are trapped in a cycle of debt and poverty, and the financial impact disproportionately impacts Black, brown, and low-income communities. In fact, over 50 percent of families with an incarcerated loved one struggle to meet basic housing and food needs.<sup>1</sup> One in three families goes into debt just to stay in touch with a loved one behind bars, and women — largely Black and brown women — carry 87 percent of the burden.<sup>2</sup>

As families continue to struggle to recover from the pandemic and face insurmountable inflation rates while wages remain unchanged, it is now even more urgent that our leaders address the egregious cost of prison communication. Families should not have to resort to skipping meals, utility bills, car notes, or even rent so that a mother can help her child with homework over the phone or a grandmother can ease her grandson out of a psychiatric crisis. The family unit should be cherished, promoted, and protected, not exploited and broken. Families with loved ones behind bars are no exception. It is a moral failure that we must make right.

Moreover, having support from loved ones is an essential human need and the root of all social success. Research has shown repeatedly that when incarcerated people stay connected to their support

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<sup>1</sup> Shanahan, Ryan and Sandra Villalobos Agudelo. “The Family and Recidivism.” American Jails, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*, Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design (2015), available at <https://ellabakercenter.org/who-pays-the-true-cost-of-incarceration-on-families>.

networks, they do better both while they are behind bars and when they reenter the community, making correctional officers and us all safer. Communication with loved ones substantially decreases incidents in prisons<sup>3</sup> and reduces recidivism upon release.<sup>4</sup> If considered a program, it would be the most cost-effective program to exist and also be the only program available to all people behind bars the day they arrive. And the positive impacts are similar for families. Children, for instance, do better at home and at school when they are able to maintain relationships with their parents in prison.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past few years, states and counties across the country have begun making prison and jail communication free in an effort to further rehabilitation, strengthen families, mitigate trauma for children, support correctional staff, improve reentry, and promote public safety. Since 2018, California, Connecticut, New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Miami, and others have made communication free in their prisons and jails with incredible success. Correctional environments have improved, critical connections have been reestablished, and people are being released with social support. Today, another dozen states are considering similar legislation. Colorado must join in passing this smart criminal justice intervention.

This session, we ask you to make our communities safer while also protecting our most marginalized families, those struggling to support their loved ones behind bars who cannot share or hear simple comforting words without threatening their own financial stability. We ask that you act now to remove the financial burden of connecting with an incarcerated loved one by passing House Bill 1133.

Sincerely,

*A Better Balance*

*ACLU of Colorado*

*AUL Denver*

*Bring Our Neighbors Home*

*Colorado Children's Campaign*

*Colorado Coalition for the Homeless*

*Colorado Criminal Defense Bar*

*Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition*

*Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights*

*Connected Families*

*Elephant Circle*

*Indivisible Colorado CD 7*

*JeffcoCan*

*Legislation Inside*

*ProgressNow Colorado*

*New Era Colorado*

*Second Chance Center*

*Soul2Soul Sisters*

*Stand for Children Colorado*

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<sup>3</sup> Solinas-Saunders, Monica, and Melissa J. Stacer. "Prison Resources and Physical/Verbal Assault in Prison: A Comparison of Male and Female Inmates." *Victims & Offenders* 7, no. 3 (July 2012): 279–311, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2012.685218>.

<sup>4</sup> Wang, Leah. "Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families," Prison Policy Initiatives (2021), available at [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family\\_contact](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

*Swing By Street Supply Mutual Aid*  
*The Reentry Initiative*  
*Together Colorado*  
*West Metro Resistance*  
*Worth Rises*

# CONNECT COLORADO FAMILIES WITH HB 1133



## WHAT WILL HB 1133 DO?

- Allow Colorado residents to communicate with their incarcerated loved ones in state prisons and privately contracted prisons at no cost
- Prohibit the state from taking kickbacks from its prison telecom vendor

Rep. Amabile  
Rep. Lindsay

"I haven't called in years now. Families are unnecessarily strapped. We are forced to go into debt just to maintain connection to our family members inside. And we couldn't do it anymore."

— Colorado mother of two whose husband is incarcerated

**\$8.8M+** → **\$1.7 - 3.3M**

### Annual spending by families on communication

CDOC charges \$0.08 per minute to speak with an incarcerated loved one, or \$1.20 for a 15-minute phone call. A 15-minute video call costs \$6.00. Electronic messages cost \$0.49 per stamp.

### Annual cost to state of making communication free

Providing free communication in prisons is **cost-effective program that promotes rehabilitation** and becoming increasingly so with innovative models being pioneered across the nation.

## SUPPORT CONNECTING FAMILIES BECAUSE...

- **1 in 3 families with an incarcerated loved one goes into debt** trying to pay predatory prison telecom vendors to maintain contact and 87% of the financial burden is borne by women.
- Every child deserves to hear "I love you" from their parent. Communication **mitigates the trauma suffered by the 1 in 28 children whose parents are incarcerated.**
- Communication with loved ones disrupts the toxicity of prisons and creates hope. When supported, incarcerated people are more committed to their own success and engaged in rehabilitative behaviors, which studies have shown **decreases incidents in facilities and reduces recidivism, making officers and us all safer.**
- **No program is more accessible and effective at improving reentry success** than communication that strengthens relationships between incarcerated people and their support networks.
- The positive social and fiscal benefits associated with communication significantly outweigh its costs.



Contact Kayla Frawley (kayla@progressnowcolorado.org) & Bri Buentello (bbuentello@stand.org) with questions.

Jesse Rula  
2/20/23

Good afternoon. My name is Ivana Bejaran, I am the state organizing director with stand for children and I will be reading a testimony written by Jesse Rula.

My name is Jesse Rula and I am here to ask for your support on House Bill 1133.

For many families with a loved one in prison phone calls may be their only consistent way of keeping in contact with each other. For children with an incarcerated parent, phone calls may be the only way that they get to tell their parents about an A they got on a test or the basketball game they won.

It may be the only way to feel connected with their parent. Research has shown that children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to struggle academically, with depression, and with their behavior overall. I have seen these struggles firsthand working with children of incarcerated parents. These children are already struggling with feeling isolated and alone, but the more frequently they can connect with their missing parent, the less they feel that loss.

Many of the families I worked with had single parents or grandparents raising the children while the other parent was incarcerated. This meant it was often difficult for them to make it to visitations. In cases like these, being able to have frequent phone calls is even more important since they couldn't always make it in person.

The benefits don't just stop at the children and loved ones on the outside. Prisoners that are

able to stay connected with their families and friends have more motivation to stay on the right path and an easier time transition back into their homes when they are released. This is especially true for young people in juvenile detention centers. Being able to have easy and affordable access to phone calls is a big part of staying connected. Families that are separated due to incarceration are already strained, being able to afford a phone call shouldn't be another barrier between them.

With all the advances we have made in technology it should be easier than ever for families to stay connected but for many families dealing with incarceration the financial constraints still remain an obstacle. Prisons should allow phone calls to be monetarily accessible for inmates to make phone calls home, especially when it has so many positive benefits for the whole family. Thank you for your consideration.

<https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/family-ties-during-imprisonment-do-they-influence-future-criminal#:~:text=Five%20empirical%20studies%20of%20the,disciplinary%20infractions%2C%20and%20lower%20recidivism.>

<https://nicic.gov/projects/children-of-incarcerated-parents#:~:text=Research%20suggests%20the%20incarceration%20of,ethnic%20disparities%20in%20incarceration%20rates.>