



February 2023

Minnesota General Assembly
75 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard
St Paul, MN 55155

Dear Minnesota state legislators,

For years, Minnesota families have had to make unconscionable decisions to afford to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones. Despite years of pleas for help, Minnesota 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. Minnesota 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 Minnesota legislature to pass SF3007 and HF2922 to stop charging families for prison communication.

Every year, Minnesota families spend an estimated \$4.5 million lining the pockets of the state's private telecom provider to talk to their incarcerated loved ones. Many are trapped in a cycle of debt and poverty, and the financial impact is felt most acutely by Black, Brown, and low-income communities, which are disproportionately impacted by racist over-policing, harsh sentencing guidelines, and mass criminalization. In fact, over 50 percent of families with an incarcerated loved one struggle to meet basic housing and food needs.¹ 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.²

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 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.

¹ Shanahan, Ryan and Sandra Villalobos Agudelo. "The Family and Recidivism." American Jails, 2012.

² *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>.

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 networks, they do better both while they are behind bars and when they reenter the community, making correctional officers and us all safer. 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.³

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. Minnesota must join in passing this smart criminal justice intervention.

This session, we ask you to make our communities safer while also protecting some of our state's 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 SF3007 and HF2922.

Sincerely,

*Alpha Emergence Behavioral Health
Community Stabilization Project*

Faith in Minnesota

Fines and Fees Justice Center

ISAIAH

LAMP Clinic

NAMI Minnesota

Minnesota Freedom Fund

Program for Research on Criminal Justice & Health at the University of Minnesota

Repowered

Road To Change

Teaching Ourselves New Examples to Uplift People (TONE UP)

The People's Canvass

Voqal

We Are All Criminals

We Resolve

Worth Rises

Wrongfully Incarcerated and Over-Sentenced Families Council

³ 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/.