

Implementation Guide



Since implementing the free phone call policy last August, we have seen a significant increase in call activity, demonstrating that when financial barriers are removed, individuals in our care make greater use of opportunities to stay connected. *These strengthened connections provide critical support and contribute to reduced conflict inside facilities and improved outcomes.*

— COMMISSIONER DANIEL F. MARTUSCELLO III,
NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS AND COMMUNITY SUPERVISION

Critical Connections: The Power of Free Communication in Prisons and Jails is the first systematic evaluation of the national policy campaign to make prison and jail communication free, which has now done so for 330,000 incarcerated people nationwide and their families. Analyzing data from six prison systems and more than a dozen local jails, the report shows that free communication fundamentally transforms individual rehabilitation, family stability, facility operations, and public safety. This Implementation Guide is designed to help policymakers, correctional administrators, and procurement officials enact and implement free communication policies.

Read about all the findings in the full report at

ConnectFamiliesNow.com/PowerofFree.

For decades, experts and research have extolled the importance of community ties in reentry success. However, the egregious cost of communication and limited infrastructure have impeded the ability of incarcerated people to maintain those ties. And the resulting financial and emotional stress has made phones one of the most volatile pressure points inside correctional facilities.

Free communication policies have changed that dynamic, with exceptional results reported not just by incarcerated people and their families, but also correctional administrators and staff.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS FOR GOVERNMENT

- **Free communication strengthened relationships between incarcerated people and their families, improving mental health and renewing commitments to rehabilitation.** Without the financial stressor of paying for calls, incarcerated people found a renewed sense of belonging and hope for the future through consistent connection with loved ones that encouraged active engagement in their own healing and rehabilitation.
- **Free communication reduced violence and operational disruptions in facilities.** Reinforcing earlier research, correctional staff described free communication as a security tool that reduced tensions, calmed facilities, and simply made their jobs easier. All correctional staff recommended that other agencies adopt free communication policies.
- **Agencies that effectively negotiated contracts adopted free communication policies at substantially lower rates.** Every jurisdiction that made correctional communication free did so at a substantial discount to the rate incarcerated people and their families were previously paying — averaging 62% across state prisons and 68% across jails. The most efficient negotiations produced effective per minute rates between \$0.016 and \$0.024 in prisons and \$0.03 and \$0.04 in jails.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Maximizing the effectiveness of free communication policies depends on policy design and implementation. The jurisdictions that have made communication free offer lessons across three areas: policy that creates access and guards against industry circumvention, procurement that lowers cost and preserves agency flexibility, and implementation that ensures effective and reliable rollout.

POLICY

- **Guarantee free communication in all forms and prevent the undermining of that intent.**
 - Establish a right to voice communication in prisons, jails, and youth facilities.
 - Require that all available communication services, including voice, video, and electronic messaging, be provided free of charge to initiating and receiving parties.
 - Provide every incarcerated person with an individual calling-enabled tablet that allows them to connect from their cells, but maintain wall phones as backup.
 - Prohibit restrictive caps on communication beyond access limitations stemming from standard facility operations, like calling hours.
 - Prohibit agencies from collecting commissions, revenue-sharing payments, or any other financial benefit tied to any services bundled with communication services.
 - Prohibit contracts or policies that limit or replace visits with communications technology.
- **Safeguard civil rights and protect against the harms of broad surveillance.**
 - Ensure accessibility accommodations for people with disabilities and equitable access for all people.
 - Protect confidential and privileged communications, including attorney-client correspondence and survivor communications protected under PREA.
 - Prohibit vendors from using or selling user data, including to train AI.
- **Strengthen oversight and accountability so the public can monitor and ensure faithful implementation.**
 - Require public transparency of all correctional communication contracts, including pricing structures, service standards, and financial arrangements.
 - Mandate regular public reporting on communication services, including access, cost to agency, and usage metrics.
 - Limit contract duration to five years and prohibit automatic renewals without competitive rebidding.

PROCUREMENT

- **Require pricing that better reflects the modern telecommunications market.**
 - Consider abandoning per-minute models for fixed-fee or per-person models that create predictable, transparent costs.
 - Ensure the effective cost per-minute is below \$0.02, or slightly higher for agencies with an average daily population of less than 1,000, regardless of payment model.
 - Eliminate all commission or reimbursement terms on any products or services paid for by incarcerated people or their families.
- **Create procurement processes that encourage vendor competition.**
 - Avoid single-vendor, exclusive, or bundled contracts by procuring discrete services separately.
- **Explore other operating models that limit the role or avoid traditional correctional telecommunications vendors.**
 - Avoid long-term contracts that create vendor lock-in.
 - Require interoperable, non-proprietary technology to ease provider switching.
 - Use managed service models in which agencies maintain control over broadband and hardware while contracting specific vendors for discrete services (e.g., software platforms, call management, or security features).
 - Explore government-owned or government-operated enterprise models where agencies retain ownership of infrastructure and platform, and contract only for technical support, if necessary.
 - Consider nonprofit or public-benefit operators whose mission prioritizes service provision over profit.

IMPLEMENTATION

- **Rebid or renegotiate the communication services contract**, using the expected increase in call volume to negotiate down the cost of communication services.
- **Maximize communications infrastructure to absorb increases in call volume.**
 - Ensure facilities are properly outfitted with broadband to ensure service quality and continuity for tablets.
 - Provide all incarcerated people with individual calling-enabled tablets, and the necessary accessories (e.g., chargers, headphones, etc.).
 - Ensure that wall phones are still maintained in the case of tablet or service malfunctions or for those who may need time to learn how to use a tablet.
- **Communicate the change to incarcerated people and their families in advance.**
 - Notify incarcerated people and their families at least two to four weeks in advance by posting across facilities and online in the most prominent languages.
 - Provide a refund mechanism for pre-existing account balances held by incarcerated people and their families.
- **Track changes in communication usage and adjust institutional policies as necessary.**
 - Report changes in communication usage (e.g. call volume).
 - Revisit policies that restrict communication access to maximize accessibility.

“ *The implementation of [free] phone calls was nearly flawless. Having the [individual tablets] helped a lot. I think the major key was advertising in the beginning, letting them know.*

— DEPUTY WARDEN OLES (CONNECTICUT)

FISCAL COST

I understand that there has been some frustration [among] taxpayers, who [don't want to bear] the burden of phone calls. But as somebody who works inside the walls, *I can say that it is working.*

— DEPUTY WARDEN OLES (CONNECTICUT)

Policymakers and government officials have a duty to deploy taxpayer dollars responsibly. Free communication in prisons and jails is among the more cost-effective programs available in corrections. Every jurisdiction that made communication free was able to do so at a significant discount to the rate incarcerated people and their families were previously paying. Across state prisons, the average discount was 62%, and across jails, the average discount was 68%.

However, costs vary widely based on how effectively agencies negotiate contracts during implementation. The most efficient negotiations produced effective per minute rates between \$0.016 and \$0.024 in prisons and \$0.03 and \$0.04 in jails. And still, agencies have more room to negotiate lower rates with states like Illinois and New Hampshire, and localities like Dallas County, Texas, negotiating even lower rates. Visit ConnectFamiliesNow.com/ data for more on the rates charged across the country.

But an important note of caution: not all contracts for free communications should be modeled. Namely, Massachusetts' rate structure uniquely rolls video into the state's "phone" rate. The state pays \$0.0799 per minute for phone calls, of which \$0.0399 covers phone service, \$0.0100 covers video calls, \$0.0100 covers video equipment, and \$0.0200 covers security features. It is unclear why the state agreed to pay for video calls based on phone call volume, which is much higher. Under this model, the state is effectively paying more than \$0.70 per minute for video calls. Further, the state contract was the basis of the contract for the state's counties, some of which also included electronic messaging, digitized mail scanning, and still other costs in their "phone" rate. These bundled contracts, especially with bundled rates, are highly discouraged.

JURISDICTION	AVERAGE RATE FOR FAMILIES PRE POLICY	EFFECTIVE RATE FOR FAMILIES PRE POLICY (INCLUDING FEES AND TAXES)	EFFECTIVE RATE FOR AGENCY POST POLICY	DISCOUNT
PRISONS				
California	\$0.025 per minute	\$0.032 per minute	\$0.016 per minute	51%
Connecticut	\$0.238 per minute	\$0.304 per minute	\$0.023 per minute	92%
Massachusetts	\$0.120 per minute	\$0.154 per minute	\$0.0799 per minute ¹	48%
Minnesota	\$0.075 per minute	\$0.094 per minute	\$0.024 per minute	74%
New York	\$0.028 per minute	\$0.035 per minute	\$0.019 per minute ²	45%
JAILS				
Los Angeles, CA	\$0.070 per minute	\$0.090 per minute	\$0.040 per minute	56%
New York City, NY	\$0.50 first minute + \$0.05 per additional minute	\$0.166 per minute	\$0.030 per minute	82%
San Francisco, CA	\$0.181 per minute	\$0.181 per minute	\$0.030 per minute ³	84%
Massachusetts jails	\$0.163 per minute	\$0.163 per minute	\$0.072 per minute ¹	56%

¹ Massachusetts' rate structure uniquely rolls video into the "phone" rate. The state corrections department pays \$0.0799 per minute for phone calls, of which \$0.0399 covers phone service, \$0.0100 covers video calls, \$0.0100 covers video equipment, and \$0.0200 covers security features. It is unclear why the agency agreed to pay for video calls based on phone call volume, which tends to be much higher. Under this model, the state is effectively paying more than \$0.70 per minute for video calls. This contract was also the basis of the contract for many of the state's counties, some of which also included electronic messaging, digitized mail scanning, and still other costs in their "phone" rate.

² New York pays \$0.015 per minute for calls and separately for the live monitoring of a uniquely high percentage of calls. If the additional cost is added in, the effective per minute rate becomes \$0.019 per minute.

³ This analysis reflects San Francisco's model at implementation. San Francisco paid \$89.78 per month per wall phone line. The effective rate is calculated using the number of phone lines and usage as provided by the San Francisco Sheriff's Office.



When they're having a good day, *we're having a good day.*

— CORRECTIONAL OFFICER WALLS (NEW YORK)