

# The *Ultimate* Connecting Families Campaign Guide

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Worth Rises** is an advocacy organization working to dismantle the prison industry and end the exploitation of incarcerated people and their loved ones. It is also a national leader in prison phone justice and the lead organizer of the Connecting Families network, a collective of national, state, and local organizations advocating for free communication in prisons and jails.

In 2018, Worth Rises won a first-of-its-kind campaign to make jail calls free in New York City. Worth Rises then helped Los Angeles, Miami, San Diego, and San Francisco pass and implement similar free jail communication policies. During the COVID pandemic, its work inspired Congress to make calls free in federal prisons through the CARES Act, a policy it has maintained in modified form since. In 2021, Worth Rises passed the first state bill to make prison communication free in Connecticut. Since, it has helped California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New York pass and implement similar policies to make prison and jail communication free.

To date, Worth Rises has helped make communication free for over 330,000 incarcerated people and saved families over \$600 million in communications costs. And it continues to lead and support campaigns at the federal, state, and local level to make prison and jail communication free across the country.



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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past half century, our access to telecommunications has significantly increased while its cost has declined substantially. Cities like New York have even replaced public payphones with free calling stations. However, the same has not been true in our nation's prisons and jails, where toll rates for calls can still top \$0.19 per minute.

For decades, incarcerated people and their families have been forced to pay egregious rates to stay connected. As a result, one in three families with an incarcerated loved one goes into debt over the cost of calls and visits, and 87% of those carrying the burden are women, disproportionately Black and brown women. As such, connecting families is not just a criminal justice issue — it's an economic justice issue, a gender justice issue, and a racial justice issue.

At the center of this connection crisis is the billion-dollar correctional telecom industry, which is dominated by three providers, with just two holding roughly 80% of the market. For decades, these correctional telecom providers shared the revenue they earned exploiting incarcerated people and their families with their government partners. Often referred to as "commissions" or "grants," these kickbacks drove up the cost of communication and provided substantial funding for prisons and jails, creating a negative incentive for governments to provide these cheap services directly. While the practice was recently banned, the egregious rates defined by commissions and demanded by providers persist.

However, for as long as the correctional telecom industry has existed, families with incarcerated loved ones have fought back against its predatory pricing in litigative and legislative battles. In the last few years, advocacy wins have created new hope for the newly dubbed Connecting Families movement.

In 2013, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued its first regulations of the correctional telecom industry at the persistence of families. Almost a decade later, in 2022, Congress passed legislation expanding the FCC's regulatory authority to cover all prison and jail phone and video calls.

The FCC unanimously passed new rules in 2024 that significantly reduced rate caps, banned commissions, and shifted most security and surveillance costs to correctional agencies. But the following year, the FCC reversed course, first delaying the 2024 rules and then reversing them in part, most notably increasing rates caps. Those rollbacks cost families \$225 million in annual relief. Still, over the past few years, these regulatory actions have substantially decreased call rates, but regulation cannot make prison and jail communication free, as it should be.

It's for that reason that incarcerated people, their families, and allied advocates are fighting for policies that would do so. New York City passed this first-of-its-kind legislation to make calls free from its city jails in 2018. The move inspired other cities, like Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, and San Diego, to do the same in the years that followed. Then, in 2021, Connecticut became the first state to pass legislation to make all prison communication free. California followed by making prison calls free in 2022, and Colorado and Minnesota in 2023. Massachusetts also made prison calls free in 2023, adding in all other communication, like Connecticut, and it became the first state to apply the same policy to all local jails. Finally, New York joined the list in 2025, becoming the first state to make prison phone calls free through administrative action rather than legislation. Today, there's a growing list of states considering similar policies.

Every day, we are getting closer to connecting families with incarcerated loved ones with fully free prison and jail communication nationwide.

## **PURPOSE AND SCOPE**

The Connecting Families movement to make prison and jail communication free is accelerating. For every campaign win, there are two or three more campaigns getting off the ground. But there's no reason for anyone launching a new Connecting Families campaign to start from scratch. Much has been tested, and we want to share what we've learned. This guide is intended to help organizers run successful Connecting Families campaigns, from start to finish.

However, this is just a guide. To capture everything we've learned, we'd need hundreds of pages that few would read. So, to maximize its reach and effectiveness, we designed this guide to be easy to follow for a broad audience and applicable in most jurisdictions. While we believe it to be a strong playbook for Connecting Families campaigns, it certainly doesn't cover every nuance that a campaign could face. We encourage organizers to adapt the guide to the specific circumstances of your jurisdiction. You need to do what feels right for your campaign and your community.

That said, while the guide can't cover everything, we've seen everything. So, if you encounter something in your campaign not covered in this guide that you'd like guidance on, do not hesitate to reach out to us at Worth Rises.





## **PREPARING YOUR CAMPAIGN**

Preparation is critical to any successful endeavor, and campaigns are no different. The work does not start the day legislative session starts (or end the day it ends, more on this later), it starts months before. You need time to build your coalition, align on your legislation, identify your sponsor, train on messaging, prepare your communications, and more — all before session begins. With all this done, you can focus your energy during session on your important advocacy. Let's get started.

### **COALITION BUILDING**

A coalition is a collective of strategically allied organizations, groups, and people working toward a common cause — in this case, to make prison and jail communication free — and the bedrock of every successful campaign. Coalition members can represent a broad range of interests but must be aligned on a single goal or narrow set of related goals. They must have a shared understanding of the problem the campaign aims to solve and a commitment to the proposed solution.

When building a coalition, you should also consider what expertise, skills, and resources are necessary for the campaign. Cast a wide net when inviting allied stakeholders to ensure that you have what's needed. Make sure there is leadership from impacted community members, who are often best positioned to explain the problem, evaluate the solution, and flag unintended consequences. Ideally, you can pull together organizations with institutional infrastructure and resources alongside impacted community groups and people with experiential expertise.

Finally, remember that the most effective coalitions are built on trusting relationships. So, take the time to individually reach out to prospective coalition members and get to know them personally.

## ***Identifying Potential Coalition Members***

List organizations and groups that engage in criminal justice advocacy in your state, especially those that work to eliminate fines and fees, address conditions of confinement, and support families and children impacted by incarceration. Consider those who have expertise in fiscal budgets.

List organizations and groups that serve populations that are heavily or disproportionately represented among those impacted by incarceration, especially those that expressly serve women, children, Black and brown communities, low-income communities, people with mental illness, and crime victims.

List impacted community members, community groups, and support groups (e.g., Facebook group for prison wives), including those who may be currently incarcerated.

**CAUTION!** Do not include legislators in your coalition. Legislators are always targets. Even your bill sponsor may stray and need nudging — in some cases, they may even go rogue. You need the ability to communicate among coalition members without their oversight. Similarly, do not include media in your coalition. Given their profession, they can compromise the confidentiality of your strategy.

## ***Conducting Outreach***

After you identify the stakeholders you intend to invite, start direct outreach. Spend a few weeks holding one-on-one meetings with these stakeholders to introduce yourself and the campaign and begin developing a personal relationship. **Strong relationships are at the heart of all organizing.** During these meetings, also be sure to ask who else they would recommend you invite and if they will introduce you. Be sure to follow up on any recommendations or introductions.

*See Appendix for a template outreach email and introductory call agenda.*

## ***Launching the Coalition***

Once you feel like you have connected with all the stakeholders your network can reach and your coalition has reached critical mass, meaning that you have all the necessary expertise, skills, and resources on board, hold your first coalition meeting.

During your **first coalition meeting**, you should focus on the following:

- **Get to know each other:** Ask people to introduce themselves with simple things like name, organization (if any), and pronouns. Add an interesting check-in question (e.g., What's your favorite summer activity?) to learn something about each other. Take the time to understand what brings everyone to the table and honor each other's contributions.
- **Establish a shared understanding of the problem and solution:** Set up the problem — how the high cost of calls negatively impacts incarcerated people and their families. Share national and state data and invite impacted people to share their experiences. Provide the solution — free prison and jail communication. Demonstrate viability by sharing information about other jurisdictions that have had success passing such policies. Raise any other related issues you would like to or solicit from others but keep the problem and solution narrow, trying to solve too much at once may complicate your efforts.
- **Align on campaign goals:** Collectively create a narrow set of goals and make sure your goals are specific so that you can clearly write them into legislation and know when you have won.
- **Determine your coalition structure:** Coalitions can come in a lot of different shapes and sizes. Small coalitions may be very casual and flat and require everyone share the work, while large coalitions may be more formal with committees that focus on different aspects of the work. Many coalitions choose to have a steering committee of members that have more capacity to move work forward. The steering committee also often makes high-level decisions in between broader coalition meetings. There is no right or wrong coalition structure. Work together to determine what makes sense for your campaign to keep the ball rolling and avoid bottlenecks. But whatever your structure, document it and the commitments of each member — shared investment and accountability are the foundation of a strong coalition.
- **Decide how you will collectively make decisions:** The most effective coalitions are built on trust. Trust depends, at least in part, on the coalition's collective buy-in and commitment to a decision-making process, which will be critical in deciding things like whether or not to accept a compromise. There are many decision-making models, including a simple majority, super

majority, and consensus, among others. Consider whether you need a quorum for decisions and whether to allow vetoes. You may even choose to base your decision-making model on the seriousness of the decision. If you have a steering committee, determine which decisions it can make alone, and which must go to the full coalition. Just make sure to practice your selected decision-making model on this decision to make sure everyone is truly bought in.

- **Determine your meeting cadence:** Use your new decision-making model to determine how often your coalition, and its committees (if any), will meet. We recommend steering committees, or coalitions without steering committees, meet at least biweekly. Of course, depending on capacity and workload, you may choose to meet more often during session or less often outside of session. You can follow up with a scheduling poll after to determine the best meeting time.

After your initial meeting, make sure to follow up with important coalition infrastructure:

- Create a coalition listserv through which everyone can easily communicate to support transparency. Google Groups work great for those with Google accounts, but your institutional partners may also have other options.
- Create a shared folder system where everyone can access coalition materials. Google folders work great for this. Ensure ongoing organization of the folder is delegated.
- Send out the listserv email and link to the folder system along with a scheduling poll through the new listserv to determine the best day and time for recurring coalition meetings.
- Add the notes from the first meeting, including the documented coalition structure and decision-making process, to this folder system.

## ***Managing the Coalition***

After your initial meeting, you will hold regular coalition meetings according to the cadence you decided on collectively. You will want to draft an agenda for each meeting to keep things on track, but agenda items will depend largely on what stage of the campaign you are in and what needs to get done, which this guide can help you determine. Careful not to be so stringent with the agenda that coalition members aren't able to make meaningful contributions or collectively brainstorm ideas. And do not be afraid to crowd source agenda ideas from your coalition members.

You should consider kicking your campaign off with an inaugural strategy session — preferably in-person — where you can map out the full legislative session, unpack your allies and targets, lock in key legislative and action dates, align on compromises, and divide roles and responsibilities. It's also a great opportunity to build rapport before the fury of session begins. Plan for at least 3-4 hours at an accessible location (a coalition member may have a space).

Finally, be sure to engage the coalition outside of meetings, especially if meetings are ever cancelled. Continued engagement is important to retaining members and continuing to advance the campaign.

## LEGISLATION

With your coalition built and on the same page about the problem and solution, it's time to get to bill drafting. What is the policy you are going to be fighting for? And what compromises are you willing and not willing to accept?

### *Model Legislation*

A bill to make prison and jail communication free should *ideally* do the following:

- Cover both prisons and jails.
- Create a right to voice communication services regardless of technology.
- Allow for unlimited call time or set a minimum guarantee of at least 90 minutes of call time.
- Require sufficient infrastructure, preferably free individual tablets, to ensure meaningful access to voice communication services.
- Require all communication services be free to the initiating and receiving parties.
- Prohibit the government from collecting revenue (e.g., commissions) on the provision of communication services. (Note: Commissions are now prohibited by federal law but codifying this in state law ensures the protection holds regardless of changes in federal regulations.)
- Protect in-person and contact visits, where still available, from replacement by technology.

To start you off, below is our model Connecting Families legislation. Walk through it with your coalition and together decide how to tailor it to your community's needs and wants. Depending on your final coalition make-up, you may consider doing listening sessions with impacted communities to help fine-tune your legislation and determine acceptable compromises.

Note that your model legislation will end up in the hands of a legislative bill drafter and is likely to change form, sometimes dramatically. It is imperative that you review the bill draft that comes back from the drafter and make sure that the bill accomplishes the coalition's goals. If the draft deviates significantly from what you submitted, consider having an attorney review.



## **An Act Regarding Communication for People Confined to Correctional Facilities**

*(1) Requirement to provide free communication services. State and local agencies charged with the operation and management of state prisons, local jails, secure treatment facilities, and youth residential facilities or detention centers shall provide all persons in their custody, including those held under an intergovernmental or private facility contract, and confined in such facilities, with voice communication service. Such state and local agencies may supplement voice communication service with other communication services, including, but not limited to, video communication and electronic mail or messaging services. To the extent that such voice communication service or any other communication service is provided, which shall not be limited beyond program participation and routine facility procedures, each such service shall be provided free of charge to the person initiating and the person receiving the communication. Such state and local agencies must at least maintain the same access to voice and other communication services as the agencies allowed on [date of the first day of the current session].*

Covers prisons, jails, secure treatment, and youth facilities, including privately contracted facilities. Covers intergovernmental contracts like IGSA's.

Using "voice communication" covers calls over VoIP, common today.

Allows introduction of new communication technology.

Requires all voice and other communication to be free and prohibits any cap on access.

Mandates at least the same level of access to communication services as currently available.

*(2) Prohibition on commissions. No state or local agency shall receive revenue from the provision of voice communication services or any other communication services to any person confined in a state or local correctional facility, secure treatment facility, or youth residential facility or detention center.*

Prohibits government agencies from collecting kickbacks, often known as "commissions," from correctional telecom vendors.

*(3) Prohibition on replacing visits with communication services. State and local agencies charged with the operation and management of state prisons, local jails, secure treatment facilities, and youth residential facilities or detention centers shall maintain in-person visits for persons in their custody, including those held under an intergovernmental or private facility contract, and confined in such facilities. Communications services shall not be used to replace any in-person visit program.*

Protects visits from being replaced by technology like video calls, sometimes improperly referred to as "video visits." Does not intend to set visit policies.

*(4) Infrastructure requirements for communication services. State and local agencies charged with the operation and management of state prisons, local jails, secure treatment facilities, and youth residential facilities or detention centers, or any private entity contracted with a state or local agency to operate or manage such facilities, shall:*

*(a) provide every person with a call-enabled tablet, at no cost, and maintain all existing voice communication devices; or*

*(b) maintain a ten to one ratio of persons in custody to operable voice communication devices in each housing unit or recreational yard, with at least two voice communication devices inside each housing unit.*

**OPTIONAL:** Include if access to communication services (i.e., getting to the phone) has been a problem historically, as agencies are likely to push back. Delete (b) if calling-enabled tablets are already generally available across facilities.

## Compromises

Just as important as your legislation is determining acceptable compromises. It is easiest to do this immediately after drafting your legislation, while it is fresh in your mind. But whether you do it then or not, do this early. You do not need to share your compromises with anyone outside the coalition, including your sponsor, and in fact, you shouldn't, so your ideal legislation isn't undermined. However, you do need to know what the coalition will and will not accept and iron out disagreements early so you don't squander last-minute negotiation opportunities trying to get on the same page — or worse yet, make an unexpected decision for the coalition and risk breaking down trust.

The most common compromises that have been made by past Connecting Families campaigns include narrowing the free policy to apply only to state prisons, dropping local jails, where people tend to have shorter stays, and narrowing the free policy to apply only to voice communication, dropping video calls and electronic messaging, which are less common and popular. At times, both of these compromises have been made. While compromises are always tough, they are sometimes necessary to get to the most important relief: free phone calls across prisons.

## RESEARCH

Your next priority and first assignment for the coalition is to conduct research. You need to know your state's budget and legislative process, what deadlines to be mindful of, who are the key decision makers, how they've voted on similar issues in the past, and who else you should tap as allies or beware of as opposition.

## ***Legislative Process and Deadlines***

It is important that you understand the legislative process in your state. In other words, how does a bill get passed, from start to finish. Because bills to make prison and jail communication free often require a budgetary allocation, it is also important that you understand how the budget is passed in your state. Both processes have associated deadlines, and you must be acutely familiar with them — miss a deadline and your campaign could be dead for the year.

<b>Legislative Step</b>	<b>Deadline</b>
Bill submitted for drafting	
Bill introduced	
Governor's budget draft introduced	
Legislative budget draft introduced	
Conference committee budget released	
Final budget passed	
Hearing in substantive committee (1 <sup>st</sup> chamber)	
Passed by substantive committee (1 <sup>st</sup> chamber)	
Hearing in money committee (1 <sup>st</sup> chamber)	
Passed by money committee (1 <sup>st</sup> chamber)	
Passed by 1 <sup>st</sup> chamber	
Hearing in substantive committee (2 <sup>nd</sup> chamber)	
Passed by substantive committee (2 <sup>nd</sup> chamber)	
Hearing in money committee (2 <sup>nd</sup> chamber)	
Passed by money committee (2 <sup>nd</sup> chamber)	
Passed by (2 <sup>nd</sup> chamber)	
Signed by Governor	

**Note:** Many states have different deadlines in the Senate and the House or Assembly. That means, before you can complete the chart above, you may need to know which chamber you plan on starting your bill in, if not both. Conversely, some states have joint committee systems that allow you to avoid the two committee processes entirely. Fill in what you can, and if necessary, come back to fill in the remainder when your bill introduction plan is clear.

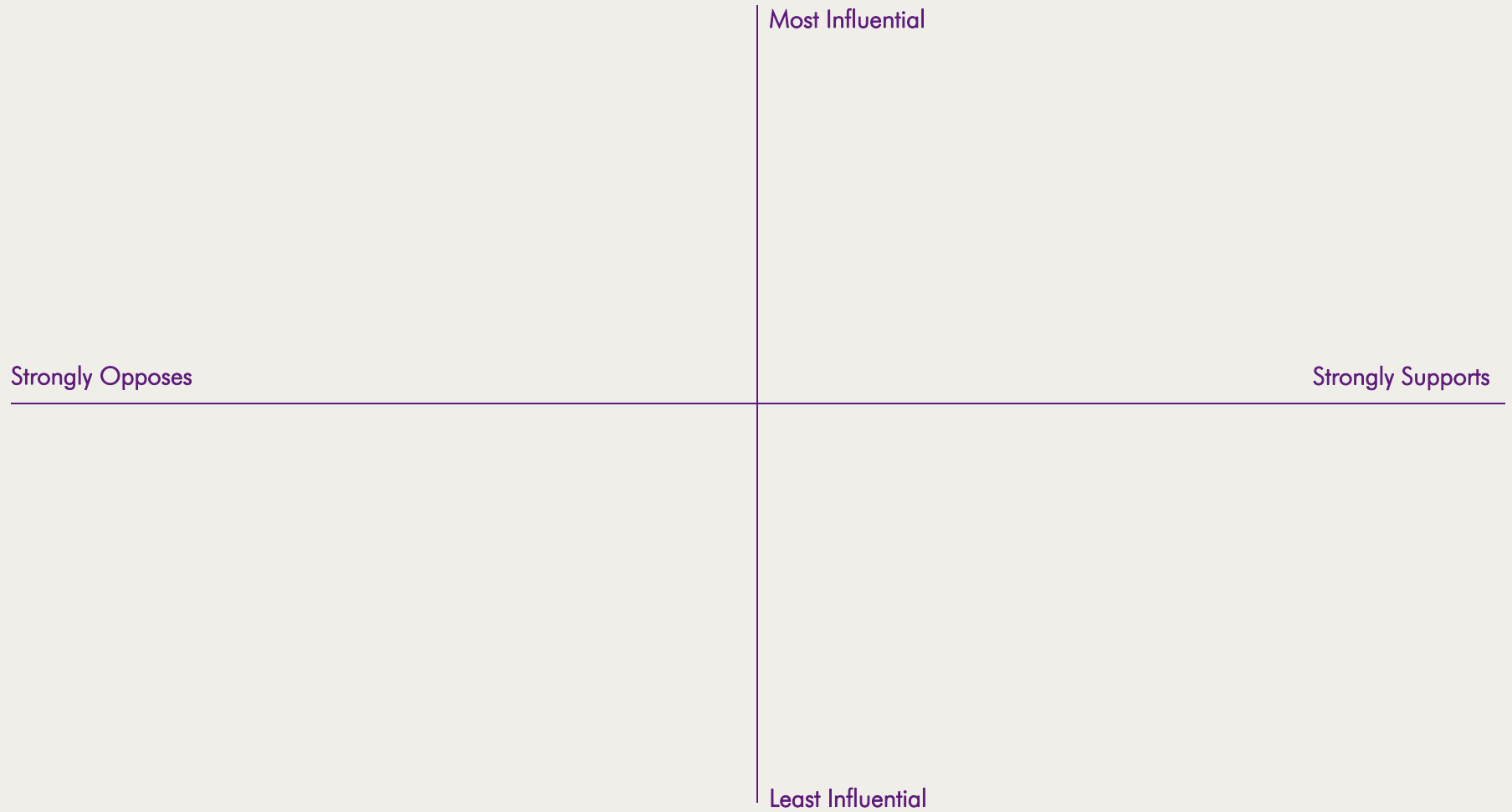
## ***Legislative Leadership***

It is not enough to know the how and when, you must also know the who. Who are the critical decision makers in each chamber — often leadership, but sometimes other powerful voices too — and how have they responded to similar legislation? Consider any power players who can be important validators or detractors.

<b>Position</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Governor		
Governor's criminal justice/public safety lead		
Senate President		
Senate money committee chair		
Senate substantive committee chair		
House/Assembly Speaker		
House/Assembly money committee chair		
House/Assembly substantive committee chair		

### ***Powermapping Allies and Opposition***

Now, it's time to take a broader look at the landscape, who are your allies and who are your opponents? Additionally, how much power do they all have to help or hurt your efforts? Map all your allies and opponents on your grid to determine your opportunities and challenges. Be sure to revisit and update this power map as often as needed during session as things may change.



## SPONSORSHIP

With your research done, it's time to identify and secure a legislative champion for your campaign. By now you probably have a short list of legislators who you think would be good bill sponsors. Maybe you have worked with them before, or they have a good track record on criminal justice issues. It's time to narrow and rank your list.

Below is a list of questions to consider when picking a sponsor:

- Do they understand the issue? Ideally, they represent a community that is impacted by this issue and have a particular interest in championing it.
- Do they care about the issue independent of who is involved or are they taking on the bill as a favor to a coalition member? Stay away from sponsors more dedicated to a single relationship than the issue. If the coalition member they have a relationship with leaves for whatever reason, they may deprioritize your bill or drop it all together.
- How many other bills are they sponsoring? Be wary of sponsors who take on too much. You want your bill to be a priority and their focus, not one of a million.
- What positions do they hold within the legislature? Consider sponsors who have important leadership roles relevant to your bill, such as chair of the substantive committee or money committee that your bill will have to pass through.
- How are they viewed by their colleagues? Some legislators are known for working well with others, especially across the aisle, and getting things passed. Others are well-intentioned rabble rousers with little track record. Preference the first.
- What chamber do you want to start your bill in, and do they have someone to receive it in the other chamber? Consider strategically what chamber you should start your bill in. It may not matter, or as in some states, you may need a sponsor in each chamber from the start. Either way, make sure your sponsor is in the right place and has a strategy for the other chamber.
- Do they have a good relationship with the governor? Every bill needs to be signed by the governor, and they have huge impact on budgets. A sponsor with a good relationship with the governor, while not imperative, is certainly helpful.
- What's their track record with other advocates? Check in with allies who have worked with the sponsor and confirm that they had a good experience. You're likely to have the same.

Once you've narrowed and ranked your list, it's time to reach out and see if your top choice will take your bill. Ask for a meeting with the legislator or their legislative director to make your case. Bring other coalition members, especially those who can share personal stories to really bring home the problem and the impact that the solution could have. If they accept, amazing, you have sponsor! Send them your draft legislation, get the ball rolling with introduction, and confirm that they will make a budget ask for the bill in their chamber. If they don't accept, move on down your list until someone does. You'll find sponsor!

## TOOLS

In addition to your external campaign collateral, it's important to prepare some internal tools to help you seamlessly manage your legislative session.

### *Legislative Tracker*

Create a simple legislative tracker, most easily done in a spreadsheet. Here is where you will track your legislative outreach and results during the legislative session. List all your state legislators and flag any with leadership or relevant committee roles. You will use that information to prioritize outreach to key legislators at different moments. You should also take note of votes on your bill as the bill moves so that you can project future votes and know where work still needs to be done. This will be a remarkably helpful tool in organizing your legislative outreach.

*See Appendix for legislative tracker template.*

## COLLATERAL

Next, let's talk about the materials that you need to put together. These materials will make up your advocacy packet, which can be sent to and left with elected officials. The goal is to ensure they have something that they can reference in your absence to determine their support for the bill.

### *Coalition Letter*

Draft a coalition letter, addressed to the legislature generally, that explains the problem your bill aims to cure and the solution you are proposing. It should explain the impact that the high cost of calls is having on incarcerated people, families, and the public today and how the bill would create relief and positively impact public safety. Work with the coalition to finalize the letter's content and put in placeholders for the bill number. *See Appendix for a coalition letter template.*

Once the letter is final, invite all organizational coalition members to sign on and send it to any allied organizations who might also be willing to sign on. Aim for a wide representation of organizations in your signatures that can demonstrate robust, broad-based support. Not all signatories need to be coalition members.

Once your bill is introduced during session, you will need to update the coalition letter with the bill number and finally send it to the legislative leadership.

## ***Fact Sheet***

Create a one-page fact sheet, which will serve as your prized marketing tool throughout the campaign. It should clearly cover the following:

- Bill number and sponsor(s).
- Brief summary of what the bill will do.
- Top talking points explaining why the bill is important.
- Key fiscal arguments to challenge bloated fiscal notes.
- What organizations are supporting the bill (preferred, but optional).

*See Appendix for a fact sheet template and sample.*

## ***Impact Story Sheet***

Elected officials need to hear from those most directly impacted. Collect short quotes, roughly two to four sentences, from incarcerated people and their families about the impact that the high cost of prison and jail communication has on them today and how that would change if communication was free. Organize these quotes into one or two pages.

Consider asking impacted community members the following questions to collect your quotes:

- How has the high cost of prison and/or jail communication impacted your ability to connect with your loved one? How has it impacted your financial situation?
- How would your connection or financial situation change if prison and/or jail communication was free?
- How do you think having free prison and/or jail communication would impact your loved one(s)?
- What would you want people who do not have to use prison and/or jail communication to stay connected to their loved ones to know about the experience?

## ***Fiscal Analysis***

There are three types of bills: those that generate revenue for the state (e.g., taxes), those that cost the state money (e.g., community investments), and those that do neither (e.g., civil rights). As you can imagine, some of the hardest to pass are those that cost the state money, or have what is commonly referred to as a fiscal note. Unfortunately, Connecting Families legislation fits into this category.

When we say free communication, we mean free to incarcerated people and their families. However, someone does, in fact, have to pay for the provision of communication services. It should be a regular part of correctional budgets. However, corrections agencies like to inflate the cost of Connecting Families bills to convince legislators they're too expensive. Why? Often to protect the windfall many of

them collect in commissions, to use the bill as a legislative money grab for their budget, or because they're being manipulated by their telecom vendor.

Conducting your own fiscal analysis can help you challenge an inflated fiscal note. However, it's not super straightforward and can take some technical analysis to determine how much the agency will need to pay to provide the service. Don't fret, Worth Rises can support you, but you'll need to collect some data. Either through a direct request from your sponsor or through an open records request, ask for the following data from the corrections agencies impacted by your bill:

- *Please provide data reports for the following from the past two full fiscal years and year to date for this fiscal year:*
  - *Monthly number of phone calls, number of phone call minutes, phone call vendor revenue, and phone call commissions (if any)*
  - *Monthly number of video calls, number of video call minutes, video call vendor revenue, and video call commissions (if any)*
  - *Monthly number of electronic messages and/or stamps, electronic messaging vendor revenue, and electronic messaging commissions (if any)*
  - *Monthly average daily population*
- *Please also answer the following questions:*
  - *How many phone devices are there across all correctional facilities?*
  - *How many video calling devices are there across all correctional facilities?*
  - *Does the population have individual tablets? If so, do they have phone, video, and/or electronic messaging capabilities enabled? If there is a cost to the tablets, what is it?*
- *Please provide your current telecom contract and any institutional policies regarding access to communication.*

Once you have all or most of this data or if you have trouble getting the data, email us at Worth Rises to request a fiscal analysis. Please allow at least one month for the analysis. *See Appendix for a sample of a Worth Rises fiscal analysis.*

**CAUTION!** If you have reason to believe that the corrections agencies in your state will be reasonable in determining the fiscal impact of the bill, consider holding the release of your fiscal estimate until theirs is released. While this is not very common, when it is a possibility, you do not want to risk releasing a fiscal estimate that is actually higher than that released by the corrections agencies.

With your fiscal note in hand, you should ask your sponsor to arrange a meeting with all the parties who influence the drafting of the legislative fiscal note, which will include the legislative fiscal office and the corrections department. They may push back but push for the meeting anyway. Ask them how they're thinking about their analysis, walk them through your analysis, and answer questions or provide data that help close the gap. Again, reach out to us at Worth Rises for help.

## MESSAGING

You're almost ready to go public with your campaign, but not just yet. It's time to train coalition members in messaging to ensure everyone is on point for everything from lobby meetings to hearings to press conferences. Every conversation and statement matters, so it's important to get it right. Strong messaging should motivate your base, convince persuadables, and isolate your opponents. Luckily, over the years, we have learned what works and what doesn't, here's the quick and dirty.

### *Basics*

Here are some basic tenets for good messaging:

- **Know what you're fighting for:** We often confuse the how with the what and it muddles our messaging. It causes us to get lost in the policy weeds rather than keeping us focused on the true goal. What we're fighting for is to connect families and how we do that is by making prison and jail communication free. The order of that messaging is critical.
- **Lead with stories:** No fight for justice was won leading with logic. We must make our audience feel the injustice we talk about. And those who have experienced it are best equipped to explain it to others, not with data but their real stories.
- **Use person-centered language:** When we put people in categories that are unfamiliar or deviant, it's easier for others to ignore or even justify their exploitation. Using labels like "offenders," "convicts," or "inmates," does just that. We must instead speak about incarcerated people like we speak about our loved ones because they are, as our mothers, brothers, and partners. When we use these familiar and loving descriptors, those we are speaking to draw parallels to their own loved ones and are more likely to empathize.
- **Align your arguments with your values:** Do not apply a negative framework trying to preempt your opposition or respond to what you think they're saying. Your messaging should amplify your values and the arguments that center them.
- **Name the culprit:** Do not just name what is causing harm (i.e., the high cost of calls), but who is causing it. You can't hold a thing responsible or accountable, but you can hold a person responsible and accountable, and that's what you want to do.
- **Beware of corporate slogans:** Not all slogans are trademarked. There are many terms and phrases that the correctional telecom industry has pioneered and correctional agencies have adopted that reinforce their intentions. For example, the term "video visitation" was coined by the industry to encourage prisons and jails to replace visits with video calls, but video calls are in no way a visit, and so we shouldn't call it that.

Below are some examples of ineffective messaging and ways to effectively reframe that messaging.

<b>Ineffective Framing</b>	<b>Effective Reframe</b>
Increasing communication prevents violence and criminal behavior in prisons and jails.	Communication with loved ones outside interrupts the toxicity of prisons and jails that reproduces harm and creates despair.
Communication strengthens the relationships people need to prevent them from recidivating and, in turn, it protects public safety.	Communication strengthens the relationships people need to ensure they are successful, which benefits us all in creating safe and thriving communities.
The carceral system, market forces, and the high costs of calls harm families.	Greedy correctional telecom vendors and their complicit government partners are exploiting families.

### ***Model Talking Points***

It's time to craft our messaging. Below is a brief list of talking points that you can use as a quiver from which you can pull what you need when you need it. Not every talking point is going to work for every person. Consider creating scripts for each of your target audiences: your progressive base, your moderate persuadables, and even your conservative opponents. Think about what moves each of them: progressive values, economic responsibility, opposing big government, family values, etc. And be familiar with these talking to always be ready to adapt to the conversation.

Center families and children, and the love between them.

- Incarceration cannot interrupt the love between two people — whether they are siblings, spouses, or a father and daughter — and correctional telecoms knowingly exploit this.
- Nearly half of all people in prison are parents to minor children — and everyone one of them deserves to hear “I love you” from their parent regardless of whether they can afford it.
- Open communication with an incarcerated parent is critical to mitigating the trauma suffered by the 1 in 28 children who face the isolation of parental incarceration in the U.S.
- For children with disabilities, like autism, consistent communication with a parent is particularly critical to meeting their developmental markers.
- A mother will always worry about the well-being of her child, even if they're behind bars. A simple call can ease that worry, but she shouldn't have to go into debt to have peace of mind.
- We all need support when we are at our lowest, this includes both incarcerated people and their loved ones on the outside. To isolate people and exploit that need is grossly unethical.

Address the disproportionate impact on low-income and Black and brown communities.

- The vast majority of families with incarcerated loved ones are low income due to a system that preys on the poor, and thus any communication cost can be an insurmountable burden.

- For many families, the cost burden of prison and jail calls has meant choosing between paying for critical needs, like electricity and medication, and staying connected with their incarcerated loved ones.
- Families often spend hundreds of dollars per month to stay connected with loved ones behind bars. Under these conditions, economic mobility, and even stability, seem like a far reach.
- One in three families with an incarcerated loved one eventually goes into debt trying to stay connected, meanwhile predatory correctional telecom corporations profit grossly.
- Women bear 87% of the burden of the costs of calls and visits with incarcerated loved ones, and disproportionately Black and brown women.

Focus utility arguments on decreasing tension inside and increasing rehabilitation and reentry success.

- Communication with the outside world creates hope for people behind bars and encourages a forward-looking mindset that drives positive behavior and program engagement.
- Increasing access to loved ones outside, drives down tension in prisons and jails, making the correctional environment safer for incarcerated people and correctional staff alike. Corrections staff report that free communication calms facilities, making their jobs easier.
- Penalizing families for supporting their loved ones behind bars is not just cruel, it's also counterproductive given that communication with loved ones outside has been shown to increase rehabilitative efforts among incarcerated people.
- Regular communication with support systems allows incarcerated people to plan for release, which includes securing housing and employment, two critical needs for people coming home.
- The sooner an incarcerated person starts preparing for their release and the more support they have through the process, the sooner they are likely to come home and better chances they have of staying home.
- No correctional program has proven to be more effective at improving reentry outcomes than providing free, regular communication for incarcerated people and their support systems. Moreover, consistent communication with the outside world reinforces the effectiveness of all other rehabilitative and reentry efforts.
- The individual success of formerly incarcerated people comes with immeasurable social and fiscal benefits to themselves, their families, their communities, and broader society.

Assign blame to predatory corporations and their government partners.

- Correctional telecom corporations enjoy monopoly contracts over prisons and jails, meaning that incarcerated people and their families have no choice in which service provider they use or what rates they pay.
- Two corporations, Aventiv (formerly Securus) and ViaPath (formerly Global Tel Link), hold roughly 80% of the correctional telecom market, and wield tremendous power.
- Federal, state, and local governments have historically conspired with these corporations through profit-sharing arrangements that provided them with corporate kickbacks. That practice has now been barred by federal law, but the impact on rates is lingers.

- Correctional agencies continue to fight to regain access to these revenues to support their basic operations, rehabilitative programs, and the welfare of incarcerated people, all of which should be funded from reliable legislatively appropriated budget in line with local priorities.

Concentrate fiscal arguments on preserving taxpayer dollars.

- Given the high cost of communication and lack of wages for incarcerated workers, it is not incarcerated people but their tax-paying families that are paying for prison and jail calls. These families — often on fixed incomes — are being double taxed to fund prisons and jails.
- Communication in prisons and jails is not expensive. It's just that for decades the two parties negotiating the contracts — corporate telecom vendors and government agencies — were in profit-sharing arrangements that drove rates up.
- When the government is responsible for providing communication in prisons and jails, the cost dramatically decreases because they are incentivized to negotiate the lowest rate. On average, agencies saw rates drop by more than 60% when they've taken on the cost.
- Free communication in prisons and jails is the most cost-effective operations, rehabilitation, and reentry tool accessible to corrections, and as such, a smart use of taxpayer dollars.
- Giving incarcerated people free access to communication increases their likelihood of success upon release, which lowers recidivism and future law enforcement or incarceration costs.
- Directly impacted people and families are likely to spend the money saved on communication with incarcerated loved ones in their communities, boosting local economies.
- Despite being the "land of the free", the U.S. has some of the highest incarceration rates in the world. If we would like to lower the cost burden of our carceral system, we should adopt alternatives to incarceration that shrink our system to a level comparable to our peers. Lowering the tax burden by cutting or denying people effective services is counterproductive.

Protect the unique concerns of pre-trial populations.

- Correctional telecom corporations charge the highest rates in local jails, which primarily hold people who are awaiting trial and cannot afford bail to secure their own freedom.
- Phone rates in local jails can cost as much as \$0.19 per minute, far outpacing the highest cost for a call across all federal and state prisons.
- People in pre-trial detention have uniquely immediate needs — such as arranging for childcare, calling out of work, paying rent, and participating in their own legal defense — that require regular access to communications with their support systems.

Read our report, *Critical Connections: The Power of Free Communication on Prisons and Jails*, for more information and messaging inspiration for your campaign.

## Federal Regulations

There has been a lot of action in recent years by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), so understandably there are a lot of questions. Here's what you should know:

- The FCC has lowered rate caps and eliminated ancillary fees, like deposit fees, for both phone and video calls. While these rules are currently in place and enforceable, they are still interim and may change as the rulemaking process continues. Final rate caps for both services are expected in early 2027. By passing state and local policies that make communication free, your campaign can ensure lasting relief for families regardless of shifts in federal regulation.
- The FCC has made a final decision to prohibit site commissions — a decision that has now survived multiple presidential administrations. The FCC has declined to reopen this question in the recent rulemaking proceeding despite calls by the correctional telecom industry and law enforcement to do so. Accordingly, there should be no loss of revenue from commissions attributed to any Connecting Families legislation — any loss of revenue from the loss of commission should be attributed to federal law instead. Note, however, that facilities can currently collect reimbursement — up to \$0.02 per minute — to cover the cost of providing communication services (e.g., cost of broadband), and that may create a loss of revenue for your bill. But this reimbursement cannot be used for any other purpose, like programming.

With your coalition built, research done, legislation drafted, sponsor secured, materials and tools in hand, and partners on message, you are ready to publicly launch your campaign and head into legislative session.



## *Advocacy Script*

Let's practice. Pick a target (e.g., potential sponsor, department of corrections, governor, etc.), think about what moves them, and draft a script for your conversation.

Name (Title): \_\_\_\_\_

What do you know about their values and what moves them? Who are their constituents?

Draft a script for your conversation. Make sure to explain the problem and the solution that you're proposing. Consider a compelling and authentic opening. And don't forget to include your ask.



## **ADVOCATING FOR POLICY CHANGE**

It's time for session! Most legislative sessions require the following steps. However, your session length will determine how long you have to complete each. Review your deadlines and move accordingly.

### **BUDGET**

While some successful Connecting Families bills have passed as standalone legislation, others have passed as part of larger budget bills. A budget bill is legislation that accompanies the state budget and has the same power and authority as a standalone bill. The advantage of passing as part of a budget bill is that budgets are highly negotiated across the aisle, and thus budget bills are often more likely to pass than standalone bills.

However, in most states, the budget process starts well before the legislative session. Agencies must submit budget requests to the governor before session starts, and then the governor puts forth their proposed budget around the beginning of session. Then during session, each legislative chamber puts forward its budget, and they negotiate with each other until they can put forward a single legislative budget in response to the governor's. The governor can sign the legislative budget or push back, through various mechanisms that vary from state to state, until all three agree on a final budget. While there is typically a budget deadline, sometimes this process can blow past that deadline.

The budget process for Connecting Families legislation is critical because, in most cases, without a budget allocation, the bill won't pass. Accordingly, throughout this section, we include notes referring to the budget process. Please take note of these as some may require action before session starts or early in session.

## **DRAFTING**

With your legislation drafted and approved by the coalition, you'll need to get it to the legislature's bill drafting body, which will take your language and incorporate it into existing law. In many states, you will need to do this through your legislative sponsor. Often you can do this before the legislative session starts so that you can be ready to introduce your bill as soon as it does. Note that some states have drafting deadlines that you must meet in order for your bill to be introduced.

Now, it's important to review the bill draft when it's returned. More often than not, there will be mistakes that you, generally with the help of your sponsor, will need to correct. Do not be offended by the mistakes. Bill drafters are non-partisan staff that do not have a stake in your bill's success. Their mistakes often stem from misunderstanding the bill's intention or challenges adapting the bill to structure and language of existing law. Don't hesitate to go back and forth but pick and choose your battles. Drafters are often overwhelmed early in session when they're charged with drafting hundreds, or in some states, thousands of bills. Just be certain that the bill doesn't lose its key components.

## **FILING**

Once you're satisfied with the bill draft, ask your sponsor to file the bill for introduction. At this stage, the bill will get a bill number and be assigned to a substantive legislative committee. In most cases, it will whatever committee typically handles corrections, public safety, or judiciary issues in your state — though you may want to fight for the bill to be assigned to the committee that handles matters of families and children to drive home your messaging. You will be able to track all this using your legislature's online system. Make sure to take note of the committee's deadlines for hearings and passage out of committee. Also, now, you can update all your coalition collateral and send your coalition letter to legislative leadership.

## **FISCAL NOTE**

The legislative budget office, which will have different names in different states, is the office responsible for creating the fiscal note for each bill. Filing your bill will trigger the office to do a fiscal analysis. However, they typically

rely heavily on what impacted corrections agencies tell them for their fiscal analysis, and almost never conduct research to understand what other cost-effective options exist in providing a service like correctional telecom to incarcerated people.

That's where you can help. Ask your sponsor to request a meeting with the staff from the legislative budget office who will be drafting your fiscal note. Reach out to your contact at Worth Rises to help you educate and hopefully lower the fiscal note. The lower your fiscal note, the lower the hurdle you'll have to overcome in money committees.

## LOBBYING

Once you have a bill number, you can update all your collateral and start lobbying. Lobbying is the act of influencing government officials to take legislative action, such as voting in support of your bill. Direct lobbying involves direct communication with the government officials you seek to influence, while indirect or grassroots lobbying involves soliciting others to contact the government officials. Both are important.

**CAUTION!** 501c(3) organizations are limited in how much lobbying they can do by federal and state law. Now, that doesn't mean 501c(3) organizations cannot lobby, they can, but how much staff time or resources they can spend lobbying is limited. And direct and indirect lobbying are valued differently for these purposes. Further, each state has its own lobbying rules as to what qualifies as lobbying and how much lobbying triggers a requirement to register as a lobbyist in that state. Federal law does not prohibit 501c(3) organizations from registering lobbyists at the state level so long as their overall staff time and resources spent on lobbying do not surpass federal limits. Finally, some organizations may have lobbying restrictions on donor gifts. We recommend any organization that will be lobbying on the legislation review their lobbying limitations and track lobbying activities as necessary to maintain compliance.

**Budget Note:** Nothing actually prevents you from lobbying before you have a bill number, but it is easier when you have legislation that you can point to. That said, it may be worth having some conversations before the legislative session even starts, especially with the executive branch like the governor's office and corrections agency regarding the budget.

## *Corrections Agencies*

Most often we think about lobbying legislators, but that may not be the first place to start. Consider first reaching out to the corrections agencies impacted by your bill. These agencies will have a lot of influence on legislators, so getting an understanding of their position on the bill before approaching legislators is helpful regardless of whether it is supportive or oppositional.

If the corrections agencies appear to be supportive, ask if they would be willing to speak in support of the bill in hearings and even lobby on behalf of the bill, both of which would be incredibly helpful. Also, ask if they have determined a fiscal impact for the bill and could share it, as well as if they'd be willing to hear about how other jurisdictions have implemented the policy to further shape their analysis. Reach out to your contact at Worth Rises to help you have this conversation.

If they are neutral or oppositional, ask them about their concerns. Is there any language that is particularly concerning or are they most concerned about the cost? Consider whether their language concerns are reasonable and whether they can be addressed with mild amendments that don't impact the overall goals of the bill. If the concerns are primarily about cost, ask if they would be willing to hear about how other jurisdictions have implemented the policy to further shape their analysis. Reach out to your contact at Worth Rises, who can help you have this conversation.

**Budget Note:** If you have particularly amenable corrections leadership and your coalition has an existing relationship with them, we strongly suggest having this conversation before session starts and filing the bill. If you can resolve any language concerns before introduction to secure support from impacted correction agencies, you will be in a much better place, and it will be easier than making amendments later. Further, if they are truly supportive, you should ask them to request a budget line to support the bill in their agency budget proposal to the governor.

## *Governor*

It's also very important to get the governor on board early. Whether you pass a standalone bill or pass your legislative language as part of a larger budget bill, the governor will have to sign it for it to become law. Unfortunately, governors have organized against Connecting Families legislation (e.g., Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin), used it to barter for carceral policies (e.g., Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker), and even vetoed more moderate bills that capped rates (e.g., California Governor Gavin Newsom). To prevent these outcomes,

socialize the idea with the governor early. Moreover, getting the governor's support may also help push unwilling corrections leadership, which operate at the behest of the governor, and allied legislators to support the bill.

**Budget Note:** If you have an amenable governor's office, strongly consider meeting with them during their budget development process and requesting a budget line for the bill. If agreed to, it will be a great start for your efforts.

## *Legislators*

The bulk of your lobbying efforts will be spent on legislators. Now, it would be overwhelming to try to contact everyone all at once, don't try it. Instead, use your legislative tracker and work with your sponsor to create priorities throughout the session. Remember, your sponsor has their own relationships, let them champion the bill among their colleagues. But ask them where the coalition could help: who are they struggling to reach or convince and how can you complement their efforts?

For example, when your bill is in substantive committee, focus on the chair(s) and majority leader(s) of that committee — it's always nice to have a bipartisan bill. After that, you can have quick meetings with those who you believe will support the bill to confirm that they will but put most of your energy into those who are not yet supportive but persuadable, especially if they're also able to persuade others who oppose. Once you're through your substantive committee, you'll want to shift your focus to the leaders and members of the money committee. As you're moving through committees, reach out to legislative leadership, they can influence chairs to move bills along and will be critical when your bill reaches a full floor vote in each chamber. When your bill is on the floor, target whoever else you need to pass. After you're through one chamber, you'll repeat this in the other chamber, where hopefully you or your sponsor has already lined up a champion.

Most of your lobbying efforts will be done with a few coalition members reaching out or popping in for meetings. However, if you have a robust coalition eager to get engaged, consider hosting a lobby day, during which you can arrange a host of meetings for a larger group of members to take. Lobby days take some organizing, so it's no small lift, but they can have a big impact with a solid turnout.

Finally, remember that the goal is not to convince everyone. Don't kill yourself trying. The goal is to have the support of a safe majority and, hopefully, bipartisanship. Make sure to use your legislative tracker to track vote projections and actual votes. It will tell you where you have work left to do.

## HEARINGS

Committee hearings present an opportunity for government stakeholders, experts, and the public to weigh in on legislation. Once a bill is heard in a committee, it can be voted on and passed by the committee. But hearing rules vary widely from one state to another. Some states require public notice of at least 72 hours while others post notification with less than 24 hours' notice. Some states will allow anyone who signs up to testify and let hearings go on for hours while others will only allow a certain number of testifiers to keep hearings short. How long people are allowed to testify also differs. Where there are no specific rules, there may also be common practices. And beyond the rules and common practices, you may make strategic calls about who and how many people to have testify based on conversations with your sponsor and the committee chairs. Make sure you know all the rules and common practices, have discussed strategy with your sponsor and coalition, and identified and prepared the right testifiers to ensure a successful hearing.

**Budget Note:** If your bill is being incorporated into a budget bill, it may not get a separate hearing. However, you may consider asking your sponsor to push for a committee hearing to amplify the issue and let people be heard.

### *Substantive Committees*

All bills start in a substantive committee, the committee the legislature feels is best suited to understand the policy issue. This committee is not meant to consider the fiscal impact of the bill, just the policy that is being proposed. The hearing in the substantive committee is when you want to turn out policy experts and directly impacted community members. If the rules, common practices, and strategy allow, you want to turn out your biggest numbers here. You want the committee members to really understand the problem and why free communication is the best policy solution.

To start, before the hearing, prepare your sponsor with talking points so they can properly introduce the bill to the committee, which only they can do. They should tee up the issue for the community and allied advocates.

On the coalition's part, determine how many people are going to testify, identify who are the right people to testify, and ensure all testifiers have prepared remarks. Typically, you want to include at least one policy expert and one directly impacted community member. For community members who have less experience testifying, help them draft effective testimony. Best practice is to discuss who will cover what and share remarks among the coalition

beforehand for feedback. If your state doesn't allow many people to testify, encourage non-testifying coalition members to submit written testimony.

Consider finding ways for incarcerated people to testify. You may ask the committee chairs if they can open a phone line for the hearing with a live operator. That is typically very hard to secure but has been done. Alternatively, you can record testimony that volunteers can play or read during the hearing. You can also have people submit written testimony.

Once the hearing starts, make sure to listen. Impacted corrections agencies are likely to be asked to give their testimony first. In addition to answering technical questions that may come up from legislators, the policy expert who is testifying should also be prepared refute false claims made by the impacted corrections agencies or opponents. You can also plant questions with friendly committee members to convey more information, especially if testifiers aren't allotted much time. Finally, if you don't know the answer to a legislator's question, feel free to tell them you'll get back to them — avoid guessing.

### ***Money Committees***

Often referred to as the appropriations or ways and means committee, depending on the state, the money committee is the committee that considers budget allocations for policy bills. Any bill that has a fiscal impact must pass through the chamber's money committee after passing out of the substantive committee and before moving to the floor. Connecting Families legislation always has a fiscal impact and thus will have to go through your money committees.

Just like in a substantive committee, for a bill to be passed out of a money committee it generally must have a hearing. However, unlike substantive committees, money committees are meant to focus on the fiscal impact of the policy rather than the policy itself. Typically, these hearings are shorter and more technically focused on money: where it's coming from and where it's going.

For this hearing, focus on turning out just one or two experts who can speak to the fiscal analysis you conducted in preparation for session and explain the cost of your bill. Their primary role is to refute inflated estimates from impacted corrections agencies and convince legislators this is a fiscally responsible policy to support though it may create a new budget line item.

## DIRECT ACTIONS

Sometimes it takes outside pressure to force legislators to take up an issue and support it. That's where a direct action can be helpful. A direct action is a public demonstration used to achieve a demand, and they can take many different forms and require different types of resources. Before doing a direct action consider your goal, who you're targeting, what resources you have, and when it needs to happen to make an impact. These questions will help you decide what direct action you should take and ensure that it is purposeful, well-planned, and safe. Feel free to get creative.

Here are some examples of direct actions, but this is by no means an exhaustive list:

- Protest or rally
- Visual or audio installation
- Call boycott
- Office sit-in
- Bird-dogging elected officials
- Petition and delivery
- Phone zap or social media hour

## OPPOSITION TRACKING

Finally, don't forget that as you're advocating for your bill, there may be others advocating against it. Consider who has a stake in the status quo, especially correctional telecom providers and government agencies avoiding new costs. There's no easy way to track what the opposition is doing but monitor your state's online lobbyist database for any providers operating in your state, review campaign donation databases for those same providers, and watch out for unique oppositional messaging that becomes common in your meetings. Note that lobbying may come through corrections agencies, meaning that providers can give talking points to corrections leadership who then parrot them to legislators. If you find any patterns, start asking questions.



## CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE

We all know how our stories can be warped in the media. Ensure you have a strong communications strategy that bolsters your advocacy every step of the way.

### MEDIA COVERAGE

You've organized your community and organizational partners, it's time to organize media. Now, of course, we know that media is neutral, but media, like any group, is made up of people with opinions. Find the right people to narrate your campaign and keep them in the know throughout.

Start by doing some research to find out what media outlets are read most in your state and favorable to progressive issues as well as which journalists write about criminal justice well. The legislature may have a legislative correspondents' office or a slate of outlets that regularly cover state and local policy, whose reporters are more likely to be abreast of bills, hearings and happenings in the legislature, and are also more likely to respond to communication from advocates. Create a media contact list — emails are often listed on media websites, but if you cannot find one, look on social media.

Below is a list of tactics you can use to encourage media coverage:

- **Direct pitches:** A direct pitch is when you reach out to a journalist with a story idea and ask them to write an article about it. Direct pitches can be the most effective way to get coverage, if done thoughtfully. The story must make sense for the journalist you're pitching and their outlet, meaning it is in line with the type of issues they typically cover. The story must also be newsworthy and timely. In the best-case scenario, the story is an exclusive, meaning the

subject is confidential and you're giving them exclusive access to write about it first. Making direct pitches is one of the best ways to build relationships with journalists. Even if someone says no, they may ask you to keep them in mind for your next idea.

- **Media advisories:** A media advisory notifies press of an event and invites them to attend. For example, you may use a media advisory to notify press of a press conference. It's best to send a media advisory a few days before the event and then the morning of. Be sure to include a brief description of the event, who is expected to speak, and where and when it will take place.
- **Press release:** A press release notifies press of something that happened. For example, you should put out a press release after a press conference to share a summary of the press conference, including quotes from the speakers. Press releases can also be used to release coalition statements in response to events or news. They should always include quotes from coalition members but consider the order as the earlier quotes are most likely to be read and used. You may also want to include quotes from allied elected officials. Remember that while ideally journalists will reach out for interviews, they may write entirely from your press release.
- **Press conferences:** A press conference is an event held for the press, typically at critical moments, to draw attention to an issue. For example, you may hold a press conference directly after a hearing on your bill to announce and remark on the results of a vote. Press conferences are great for television journalists in particular who often need video to report. The biggest challenge with press conferences is getting press to attend given how many other things are often happening. Try to ensure your press conference is not competing with another event. For instance, do not schedule your press conference at the same time as the Governor's state of the state address. Try also to book speakers that are likely to draw press, like your legislative sponsors. After your press conference, stay to talk to press that attended and ensure they have everything they need to write their story. Follow up if necessary.
- **Regular follow-up:** Make sure to regularly share updates on the campaign with any journalist that has reported on it. They may not write at every moment, but they are already invested. Following up also allows you to build a progressively stronger relationship with them.

## OPINION EDITORIALS AND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

You're only going to get so much from someone who isn't as close to the issue as you and has to, after all, remain neutral. If you want to really make a statement with a clear viewpoint that supports your campaign, consider publishing an opinion editorial or letter to the editor. The most powerful pieces are often authored by directly impacted people, which you can help ghost write to alleviate the pressure writing may create.

### *Opinion Editorial*

An opinion editorial, often referred to by the shorthand op-ed, is an article that expresses the opinion of an author with no formal affiliation with the publication's editorial body.

Here are some tips for writing a strong opinion editorial:

- Choose the outlet you want to pitch based on your target audience but have some backups. Consider this audience when choosing an author, making sure they're a credible messenger.
- Stay within the word limit set by the outlet.
- Open strong with a personal anecdote and use sensory descriptors that help people put themselves in the author's shoes.
- Speak from the first-person in plain language, using a professional but personal tone.
- Express an opinion clearly, weaving campaign talking points through the personal narrative.
- Cite evidence to support your talking points (e.g., "studies have shown" and link to the study).
- Create hope that things can change (e.g., "There's hope, other states have recently taken a similar step to connect families.>").
- Before closing, include a subtle call to action (e.g., rather than "call your legislator to support our bill" say "it's time that our state passes this policy").
- Close by circling back to your opening story.

When pitching the outlet, be courteous, explain why the author is the right person to speak about this topic and why the piece is timely (e.g., hearing coming up), set a deadline by which you need to hear back, and thank them for their time.

Read the following opinion editorial and answer the questions that follow.

**Opinion: Families shouldn't go into debt paying for prison calls**

*HB1133 would make calls from Colorado prisons free for incarcerated people and loved ones.*

By Janelle Jenkins | *Published in the Denver Post on March 30, 2023*

My daughter was just six months old when her father, and my husband at the time, went to prison. I lost my spouse, she lost her father, and we both lost the financial stability he helped provide, at a moment when we needed it most. As the cost of his incarceration mounted on me, I could not afford to keep us together and the closeness of our family began to slip away. My daughter deserves to know her father, but corporate greed is making it impossible.

When he first went in, I was determined to stay in regular contact. I wanted him to build a genuine bond with our daughter in those critical early years. It required consistent and frequent communication, which costs money — a lot of money. A social worker, I was now the sole breadwinner for our family, but after rent, gas, groceries, and other regular household expenses there was little left to pay for calls.

In the first five years, I spent over \$16,000, or more than \$250 per month, just on phone calls, which back then cost even more than they do now. We spoke every day, sometimes twice a day. I wanted my daughter to hear his voice often. The egregious rates the state and its corporate vendors charged racked up fast. It was not long before we, [like one in three families](#) with an incarcerated loved one, were forced into debt.

Soon, the cost became unbearable and calls became less frequent. It tore my heart apart not just because my daughter deserved to feel her father's love, but also because everything I read — [study after study](#) — told me that denying her that relationship would have a lasting negative impact on her through adulthood. Like any parent, I did not want to let that happen, but what choice did I have? I simply could not afford it.

Now, my daughter only speaks to her father on birthdays and some holidays. And despite the years that have passed, I'm still paying off that debt. I take extra shifts that pull me away from her to help pay it down. She does not get the time she deserves with either of us, but all three of us have done our best to stay bonded through it all and I am proud of that.

Still, it doesn't have to be this way for us or any other families suffering similar circumstances.

Colorado lawmakers should not allow corporations to prey on its families, and certainly should not allow the state to join in. It is not only morally reprehensible but also counter to public safety. Women like me and families like mine are providing irreplaceable support to people who are incarcerated, which encourages positive behavior and improves their chances at success when they come home, [as 95% will](#). There is no program that can do what we do.

Not only are we putting in time to help our loved ones turn around their lives, which benefits all Coloradoans, but we are paying for it too. Families currently pay \$8.8 million annually to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones, though the state could provide free communication for less than a quarter of that, or \$1.7 million, according to the advocacy organization Worth Rises. As taxpayers who help pay for our prison system and already pour in too much labor to do what it won't, we cannot afford this double tax.

It is way past time that the Colorado legislature protects families and invests in the success of Coloradoans behind bars. Thankfully, it now has the opportunity. Introduced by Representatives Mandy Lindsay and Judy Amabile, [HB1133](#) would make calls from Colorado prisons free between incarcerated people and their loved ones.

Connecticut, California, New York City, San Francisco, and Miami are just a few of the states and cities that have already passed similar bills. The results are incredible: families, who are disproportionately Black, brown, and low-income, are saving millions and reuniting with their loved ones. Even correctional administrators and officers are celebrating the successes.

If HB1133 passes, children like my daughter will have a chance at reestablishing a bond with their parents behind bars. They can have that daily call before bed to help cope with their parents' absence and still grow up feeling loved. And mothers like me can sleep easier knowing that every dollar we earn is not filling corporate coffers but creating a healthy and happy home for our children.

What made Janelle's opinion editorial compelling? What stuck out to you? What will you remember?

What did you learn about Janelle and the impact that the high cost of prison calls has had on her family?

What facts did Janelle include about prison communication and how did she support them?

What is Janelle calling for? What makes you think that what she's calling for can happen?

Here are more examples of past opinion editorials published by Connecting Families campaigns:

- [Those behind bars need to be connected to their families](#), *The Providence Journal*, Mario Monteiro, Kyle Campbell, and Steven Parkhurst (2025)
- [For Mother's Day, let's make prison calls free](#), NJ.com, Susan Guardia (2024)
- [A mother's wish: Make calls from prisons free](#), Valley Breeze, Melonia Perez (2024)
- [A mother's appeal: Make prison calls free](#), NJ.com, Malika McCall (2023)
- [Families shouldn't go into debt paying for prison calls](#), *Denver Post*, Janelle Jenkins (2023)
- [Here's a simple way to improve public safety — make prison phone calls free](#), *Times Union*, New York State Senator Jamal Bailey and New York Assemblymember Harvey Epstein (2023)
- [If public safety is the goal, free prison calls are the answer](#), *CommonWealth Magazine*, Massachusetts Representative Chynah Tyler and Bianca Tylek (2022)
- [Take profit out of jail calls. Make it free to talk to loved ones behind bars.](#), *Detroit Free Press*, Erica Ayers (2021)
- [Prison communication is getting more, not less, expensive](#), *CT Post*, Jewu Richardson (2021)
- [As we struggle to stay connected, prison calls must be free](#), *Essence*, Bianca Tylek (2020)
- [The cost of prison phone calls is outrageous](#), *Hartford Courant*, Jovan Bates (2020)

## ***Letter to the Editor***

A letter to the editor, sometimes referred to by the acronym LTE, is a reader's letter published by an outlet about an issue of concern, often in response to a recent article. Letters to the editor are essentially mini opinion editorials and offer a great way to respond to a quote or point in a recent article that you either want to reinforce or challenge.

Here are some tips on writing a letter to the editor:

- If responding to an article, specify what article. Note that the article must have been written by the same outlet you are writing to.
- Stay within the word limit set by the outlet.
- Be concise, clear, and direct (e.g., what did the author get wrong or miss?).
- Cite evidence to support your opinion (e.g., "studies have shown" and link to the study).
- Before closing, include a subtle call to action (e.g., "Next time consider asking community members about their experience and not just regurgitating police press releases.").

When pitching the outlet, be sure to be courteous, name the article you're responding to (if applicable), explain why the author is the right person to speak about this topic, and thank them for their consideration.

Here are examples of past letters to the editor published by Connecting Families campaigns:

- [Governor needs to make welfare of those in jail her concern, too](#), *Boston Globe*, Lois Ahrens (2023)
- [Burden of prison calls too high](#), *New Haven Register*, Diane Lewis (2019)
- [An inside perspective on prisoners' phone calls](#), *Hartford Courant*, Tranel McCoy (2019)

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

In today's world, social media is critical to any successful campaign. It allows you to educate people, build your base, share calls to action, target elected officials, collaborate with influencers, break news, and more. Viral moments can be gamechangers for your campaigns. Make sure to incorporate social media into each aspect of your campaign and be thoughtful.

Social media is hard to master. The algorithms differ from platform to platform, and they are always changing. Generally, try to use clean and compelling visuals, include a call to action, and ask other coalition members to boost your content quickly to encourage the algorithm to promote it. Below are some additional tips by platform type.

### ***Text-Based Platforms***

Text-based platforms are great for breaking news, responding to others' content, and targeting elected officials. Examples of text-based platforms include X (formerly Twitter), BlueSky, and Threads. Here are some quick tips for posting on these platforms:

- Always include a clear opinion or take on the content you're sharing.
- Use threads for longer posts but cut the content in a way that promotes the sharing of individual posts.
- Incorporate images, videos, or links in your posts.
- Use handles when targeting elected officials but limit your targets to less than three.
- Limit the use of hashtags to one and try to incorporate it into the post's language.
- Refrain from posting something that is just list of handles and hashtags.
- Engage with conversations happening on the platform, quoting other posts.
- Avoid engaging with toxic accounts, block them.

## ***Visual-based Platforms***

Visual-based platforms are great for educating people and creating viral moments. Examples of visual-based platforms include Instagram and TikTok. Here are some quick tips for posting on these platforms:

- Use visually compelling content, particularly organic videos.
- If using static images on Instagram, try to use carousels, limit text on the cover, and get the help of a graphic designer to create clean graphics.
- On Instagram, use stories to boost your content and drive people to links.
- Post just before and after the typical workday when people are most active.
- Try to drive immediate engagement to encourage the algorithm to boost your post.

## ***Community-based Platforms***

Community-based platforms are great for organizing people, particularly impacted families through groups. An example of a community-based platform is Facebook. These platforms require organic engagement and conversation with supporters.





## **CELEBRATING THE WIN AND PLANNING FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

You've won! Now, what? Well, a lot, but hopefully some rest too! It's time to announce and celebrate your win, plan for implementation, and then measure your impact.



### **ANNOUNCE AND CELEBRATE**

When the governor's signature comes down and your legislation is law, get ready to tell the world, because it needs to know. First, those who need this relief should know it's coming and the details of what they can expect. Second, your win contributes to the movement's momentum and will inspire other states to take similar action. Third, all those who contributed, something big or small, deserve to share in the celebration — that's how you keep people excited about and committed to the work. Fourth, it lets people know you can deliver on your promises and have built the power to get things done, encouraging people to support you in the future. And finally, it sparks hope at a time when many are taking losses.

Start with your announcement, and thank everyone who supported the campaign no matter how small their contribution. From your legislative sponsor to those who testified at hearings to your petition signers, everyone deserves credit for stepping up when they didn't have to. This was a collective effort and should be celebrated as such. To that end, encourage all your coalition partners to release their own announcements, the more the merrier. At a minimum, each organization should send out a shared press release, post on social media, and send an email to their supporters. Make sure to also follow up with any journalists who covered the story and encourage them to cover the win.

Next, make sure the word gets out inside and among impacted families. Obviously, community members part of the coalition can begin to get the message out but consider sending letters inside. You can even ask impacted corrections agencies, if amenable, to notify the incarcerated population.

Once the announcements and media are out, take a moment to celebrate and rest. Call and thank your partners personally. Host a gathering, maybe a BBQ or a happy hour, if possible. And then just rest for a couple weeks, assuming the implementation window allows. You put a lot of work into this and have been going for quite some time, with what were certainly some tense moments, take a second to breathe and rejuvenate.

## PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION

After some self-care, it's time to follow up about implementation. If your policy goes into effect in less than three months, unfortunately, you need to get to follow up quite quickly. You want to make sure that the policy that you worked so hard to pass is implemented safely and effectively, which corrections agencies can't do alone.

Reach out to the impacted corrections agencies and ask for a meeting to discuss implementation of the Connecting Families legislation. If you're having trouble getting a meeting, ask your bill sponsor to step in and ask for the meeting on your behalf.

Below is a list of things you'll want to cover with impacted agencies:

- Plans to renegotiate the existing contract or procure a new contract. Either is fine, but there's often more bargaining power in a new procurement process. However, if the bill's effective date is less than 9 to 12 months out, then a renegotiation is likely necessary as procurement typically takes at least that long.
- Current low call rates across the country, like \$0.009 per minute in Illinois, \$0.013 in New Hampshire, \$0.016 in California, and \$0.020 in Mississippi, to encourage them to secure a rate at least as good given the impending increase in volume.
- New innovative compensation structures that they should consider negotiating, like San Francisco's \$89 monthly fee per phone line regardless of use. Some vendors have even offered monthly rates as low as \$49.
- Plans to proactively increase calling infrastructure, or at least responsively do so if call volume requires it. Encourage agencies to distribute free individual tablets with calling enabled to mitigate infrastructure concerns with wall phones.
- Any anticipated policy changes with regard to communication access, pushing them to maximize access.

Reach out to your contact at Worth Rises for help with this stage of the process. We can help answer questions about what's been done in other places, provide guidance on requests for proposals, review vendor bids, negotiate contract terms, and more.

## MEASURING IMPACT

You fought this fight to make a difference, don't forget to track and share your impact. It's important to show others how free prison and jail communication changes lives. It reinforces to elected officials in your state that they did the right thing and may move them to support similar causes in the future. It inspires families and allied advocates to run similar campaigns in other states. And it demonstrates your ability to deliver, encouraging support for your advocacy in the future, which you deserve.

### *Qualitative Research - Stories*

Capture and amplify the stories you hear. It might be a social media post or an anecdote heard through coalition members or a thank you card sent to your legislator. Whatever you're hearing, record it. If possible, take the time to do intentional outreach in the weeks and months that follow implementation, and capture stories in video, audio, and writing.

Consider asking those impacted the following questions:

- How has your life changed since communication became free?
- How have your relationships changed?
- Have you been able to reconnect with anyone, and how has that been?
- What have you done with the money you saved?

Find ways to tell those stories through direct outreach to legislators, the media, and social media.



## Quantitative Research - Data

Work with your sponsor to obtain data from the impacted corrections agencies about communication use before and after the policy's implementation. Communication volume will undoubtedly increase, the question is just how much. Release the results by pitching an exclusive to the press, sending out a press release for broader coverage, and posting on social media.

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NEWS

### Now free, phone calls in Connecticut prisons soar

Advocates say increased access to outside world will improve outcomes after release

**Worth Rises**  
@WorthRises

BREAKING! Call time is up an amazing 120% since Connecticut, which had the highest prison call rates in the nation (up to \$0.32 per min), made calls free in July thanks to legislation we passed in 2021. Incarcerated people are now spending 42 mins each day talking to loved ones.

Month	Avg mins pppd
May 2022	18.3
June 2022	19.8
July 2022	42.1
August 2022	41.7

**Connecticut**

3:24 PM · Oct 5, 2022



## Conclusion

A simple call can make a world of difference. Every person deserves to have the support of their loved ones, especially when they're at their lowest. It mitigates trauma, sparks hope, and drives positivity and productivity — whether you're inside or out. For those exiting prison or jail, it can be the difference between coming home unhoused, unemployed, and isolated and coming home with housing, employment, and support.

Such outcomes speak to more than a moral imperative — they also determine reentry success and the safety of our communities. To allow the greed of a predatory industry to tear families apart and undermine our public safety is an ethical and political failure on the part of our society.

Thankfully there are organizers and advocates like you fighting to change the status quo and reconnect families. We hope this guide is helpful in your efforts. We are excited to see what you can do with it and to support your ongoing advocacy. Please do not hesitate to reach out to your contact at Worth Rises with any questions.

Onward!  
The Worth Rises Team

## **Appendix: Templates & Samples**

## ***Outreach Email Template***

Hi [their name],

My name is [your name], and I'm the [your title] at [your organization]. We are interested in launching a [Connecting Families](#) campaign to make prison and jail communications free in [state]. California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New York have already done this, and we should be next.

We know you do great work in and wanted to connect with you for a moment to introduce the effort, gauge your interest, and explore partnership. I'd really appreciate the opportunity to meet in the coming week or two. If you're up for it, please let me know your availability.

Our hope is to connect with as many potential partners as possible, so please let me know if you know of any others I should reach out to. Of course, a warm introduction would be amazing.

Thank you!  
[Your name]

## *1-on-1 Call Agenda Template*

- Personal and organizational introductions (5 minutes)
- Campaign background
  - Problem – *Today, 1 in 3 families go into debt over the cost of calls and visits, and 87% of those carrying the burden are women. Children are suffering the trauma of parental separation, families are suffering from disconnectedness and/or struggling financially, incarcerated people are disconnected from the communities they're going home to.*
  - Solution – *We can make prison and jail communication free like other states are doing around the country. Six states have now passed legislation to make prison and/or jail communication free, saving families over \$600 million and generating 6.4 billion more minutes of call time. It's time we do this here.*
  - Campaign – *We're hoping to help launch a campaign to make prison and jail communication free in [state] next year. We are connecting with organizations around the state to see if there might be any interest in partnering. We're hoping to build a broad-based coalition and need partners who can organize community members, conduct research, lobby elected officials, support with communications, and more.*
  - Questions
    - *Do you have any questions about the effort?*
    - *Are you aware of any other similar efforts in [state]? We'd love to connect with them, if so.*
- Ask
  - *We'd love to know if this campaign would be something you'd be interested in being part of as a coalition member.*
    - *If yes: Awesome! Do you have an idea of what type of role you'd like to play? What are your strengths (organizing, comms, lobbying, etc.)?*
    - *If not: No worries! We get that folks have other critical priorities, and really appreciate your time.*
  - *Do you know of others — community members, community groups, organizations, or elected officials — who would be interested in fighting for free prison and jail communication that we should reach out to? Would you mind making a warm introduction?*
- Next steps
  - *Confirm any commitments or asks (e.g., warm introductions)*
  - *Thank you so much for your time, what you've shared is super helpful.*
    - *If joining coalition, add: We will be scheduling an introductory coalition meeting soon, and we'll be sure to invite you. Please look out for an email.*



[Month YY]

[Legislative Address]

Dear [state] legislators,

For years, [state] families have had to make unconscionable decisions to afford to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones. Despite years of pleas for help, [state] 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. [State] 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 [state] legislature to pass [bill number(s)] to stop charging families for prison and jail communication.**

Every year, [state] families spend an estimated [\$# 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.<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>

It is urgent that our leaders address the egregious cost of prison communication. Families should not have to resort to skipping meals, utility bills, car payments, 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.

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 and 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>3</sup>

Over the past few years, states, counties, and cities across the country have begun making prison and jail communication free to further rehabilitation, strengthen families, mitigate trauma for children, support correctional staff, improve reentry, and promote public safety. Since just 2021, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New York have all passed legislation making communication free in their prisons, and even some jails, with incredible success. Many counties and cities have also made jail communication free, including Miami, New York City, San Diego, San

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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>.

<sup>3</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/).

Francisco, and others. 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. [State] must join in passing this smart criminal justice intervention.

This session, we ask you to make our communities safer while also protecting some of [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 [bill number(s)].

Sincerely,

[List of organizational signatories]

# VOTE TO CONNECT [STATE] FAMILIES

[Sponsor names]

Contact: [contact email]

## What will [bill number(s)] do?

- Allow [state] families to communicate with their incarcerated loved ones at no cost
- Prohibit the government from taking kickbacks from correctional telecom vendors
- Ensure incarcerated people have reasonable access to communication services
- Protect in-person visits for [your state] residents with their incarcerated loved ones

---

[Impact Quote]

---

**[\$#.##] MILLION**



**[\$#.##] MILLION**

### Annual spending by families on communication

[State] charges [rate] per minute to speak with an incarcerated loved one, or [rate] for a 15-minute call. County jails charge.

### Annual cost of providing free communication

Providing free communication in prisons and jails is a cost-effective way to promote rehabilitation and improve reentry success. Costs are getting even cheaper as innovative models are pioneered across the country.

---

## Support the Connecting Families Act because...

- 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.
- 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.
- 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 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 providing free communication that strengthens relationships between incarcerated people and their support networks. The positive social and fiscal benefits associated with communication significantly outweigh its costs.

---

[Coalition logos]

# VOTE TO CONNECT MINNESOTA FAMILIES



## WHAT WILL SF 3007 AND HF 2922 DO?

- Allow Minnesota residents to communicate with their incarcerated loved ones in state correctional facilities at no cost
- Prohibit the state from taking kickbacks from its prison telecom vendor
- Ensure reasonable access to communication services in state correctional facilities
- Protect in-person visits for Minnesota residents with incarcerated loved ones

Sen. Oumou  
Verbeten  
Rep. Agbaje

"There were times that my family really needed my emotional support, but I couldn't afford to give it to them. My daughter attempted suicide, and I had to use someone else's phone time, which would have gotten me punished if I was caught."

— Jennifer M., formerly incarcerated Minnesota mother

**\$4.5M+** → **\$2.1 - 2.4M**

### Annual spending by families on communication

MN DOC charges \$0.075 per minute to speak with an incarcerated loved one, or \$1.13 for a 15-minute phone call. They also collect 40% in commissions, bringing in \$1.4 million a year.

### 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 **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.





85 Delancey St., 2<sup>nd</sup> Fl.

New York, NY 10002

[www.worthrises.org](http://www.worthrises.org)

[Twitter](#) [Instagram](#) [Facebook](#) @worthrises

May 10, 2023

Senator Clare Oumou Verbeten (66, DFL)  
2101 Minnesota Senate Bldg.  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Representative Esther Agbaje (59B, DFL)  
437 State Office Building  
St. Paul, MN 55155

**RE: Fiscal impact of free phone calls for incarcerated people**

Dear Senator Clare Oumou Verbeten and Representative Esther Agbaje,

We, at Worth Rises, want to applaud you for considering policy that would connect families by making prison communication free. We are writing today to provide an expert analysis of the fiscal impact this policy would have on Minnesota.

Worth Rises is a non-profit organization working to end the exploitation of incarcerated people and their loved ones. We are a leader in the prison phone justice space at the federal, state, and local level, and have helped pass and implement policies in Connecticut, New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Miami, and Louisville to make prison and jail phone calls free. We have built models based on the data we have gathered from prisons and jails across the country that allow us to support administrators and lawmakers with critical fiscal analyses.

**Based on our analysis, we project that implementing fully free communication across Minnesota state prisons would cost the state between \$2.7 and \$2.0 million annually, while saving Minnesota families over \$4.5 million.** Below please find our detailed fiscal analysis for this proposed policy, which we hope is helpful to you as you continue to advocate for phone justice for the thousands of Minnesota residents directly impacted by incarceration. Please feel free to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

Bianca Tylek  
Executive Director

## DATA & ASSUMPTIONS

**Population.** For this analysis, we use the average daily population for 2022 for the Minnesota Department of Corrections, or 7,556.

**Current spending.** For this analysis, we use 2021 phone call revenue data provided by the Minnesota Department of Corrections. We did not receive revenue data for video calls or electronic messages and have excluded it from our analysis, but this revenue data would increase the current spending significantly, making our current spending estimate an underestimate.

**Commissions.** Minnesota, like many states, collects commissions on the call revenues paid by incarcerated people and their families. For this analysis, we use a commission rate of 40% and actual commission figures as provided by the Minnesota Department of Corrections.

### Phone Calls

- **Cost of service.** Incarcerated people in Minnesota prisons and their loved ones are charged \$0.075 per minute for calls. For this analysis, we assume that the Minnesota Department of Corrections and the county jails would renegotiate rates in line with other progressive states and counties that have prioritized affordability in assuming this cost directly. We also assume the Minnesota Department of Corrections would be interested in exploring new innovative cost structures for providing communications services.
  - **Option 1 – Per minute.** There are more competitive rates offered by all the leading jail telecom providers. For example, families pay a per minute rate of \$0.009 in Illinois, \$0.0119 in Dallas, \$0.025 in California, \$0.029 in Rhode Island, and \$0.05 in 17 counties in New Jersey. In this analysis, we conservatively assume that if the Minnesota Department of Corrections continues with a per minute compensation structure, it would secure a rate of \$0.0119.
  - **Option 2 – Per phone line.** In recent years, correctional agencies have been exploring new compensation structures to provide communications services that better reflect modern day technology. One of these models was pioneered by the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department and is based on a per phone line basis, whereby the agency pays a monthly fee per phone line (\$89.78 per phone line per month). Since pioneering this model other in 2021, new procurement processes have already produced rates as low as \$49 per month. This model better aligns with intention to increase communication behind free calling policies by supporting unlimited calling. In this analysis, we calculate our estimate based on the 1,034 phones across the state’s correctional facilities, as reported by the Minnesota Department of Corrections, and a monthly per phone line rate of \$57.
- **Call volume.** Our elasticity model accounts for changes in call volume based on changes in rates. We use this model to account for the increase in volume expected when rates fall to zero as the proposed policy would require. More specifically, when phone calls are free, we predict that call volume will increase to an average of 30.9 minutes per person per day. Notably, this is only a slight increase from the 26.8 minutes per person per day used currently, according to data provided by the Minnesota Department of Corrections.

### *Video calls*

- **Cost basis.** Incarcerated people and their loved ones in Minnesota are charged \$0.233 per minute for video calls. For this analysis, we assume that the Minnesota Department of Corrections would negotiate rates in line with other states and counties that have prioritized affordability by assuming this cost directly. For example, in Montana, families pay \$0.15 per minute for video calls, and in Michigan, families pay \$0.16 per minute. Further, a major industry vendor offered a rate of \$0.10 per minute during negotiations related to video calls in Virginia. Thus, we assume that if Minnesota was to continue with a per minute compensation structure and leverage the expected increase in volume, it would secure a rate of \$0.07 per minute.
- **Call volume.** The Minnesota Department of Corrections did not provide data regarding the use of video calls. However, we know that phone calls are the primary method of communication for incarcerated people and their families. In a pilot program in Colorado, when 280 women were given free video calls for one year, they used 15.4 minutes per person per month. Accordingly, for this analysis, we assume an average of 15.4 minutes per person per month.

### *Electronic messages*

- **Cost basis.** Incarcerated people and their loved ones in Minnesota are charged \$0.40 per “stamp” for electronic messages. There are more competitive rates offered by all the leading prison telecom providers. For example, in Maine, all families receive 10 monthly electronic messages for free and pay \$0.025 for additional messages. In California, families pay a per message rate of \$0.05 for all message types. For this analysis, we assume that if the Minnesota Department of Corrections continues with a per message compensation structure, it would secure a rate of \$0.03 per message.
- **Message volume.** The Minnesota Department of Corrections did not provide data regarding the use of electronic messaging. However, we know that when Connecticut made electronic messages free, we saw an average use of 5.4 messages per person per day. Accordingly, for this analysis, we assume an average of 5.4 messages per person per day.

## ANALYSIS

### **Making prison communications free would save Minnesota families at least \$4.5 million each year, but likely much more given the lack of revenue data on video calls and electronic messages.**

- Today, Minnesota residents are paying \$0.075 per minute to speak with an incarcerated loved one, or \$1.13 for a 15-minute phone call. Residents also pay \$0.233 per minute for video calls, or \$3.50 for a 15-minute video call. The proposed policy would make prison phone calls free for incarcerated people and their families.
- Minnesota residents pay the state’s prison telecom vendor, GTL, \$2.1 million and the state another \$1.4 million in commissions to speak with incarcerated loved ones annually, before taxes and fees. This figure does not include revenue for video calls and electronic messages, which was not provided.

- GTL also collects additional fees, including an account funding fee of \$3 per transaction (capped at \$50). With a national average deposit of \$17, the account funding fees alone are estimated to cost families an additional \$0.6 million annually.
- Families also pay an estimated \$0.4 million annually in other government fees and taxes, including the substantial Federal Universal Service Fund fee assessed on interstate calls.

**The fiscal impact of the proposed policy is between an estimated \$2.7 and \$3.0 million annually.**

- The Minnesota Department of Corrections collects a 40% commission on prison calls and thus will assume a \$1.4 million loss of revenue associated with this policy. This loss of revenue represents more than half of the fiscal impact for this policy.
- The cost of providing free phone calls in correctional facilities across Minnesota would range from an estimated \$0.7 million for a per phone line compensation model and \$1.0 million for a per minute compensation model based on all the assumptions outlined above.
- The cost of providing free video calls in prisons across Minnesota would be between an estimated \$0.1 million per year based on the assumptions outlined above.
- The cost of providing free electronic messaging in prisons across Minnesota would be an estimated \$0.5 million per year based on the assumptions outlined above.

# A *Call* Makes the World of Difference

