

CRITICAL CONNECTIONS

The *Power of Free* Communication in Prisons and Jails

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Authored By

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Acknowledgements

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About Us

Worth Rises is a non-profit organization dedicated to dismantling the prison industry and ending the exploitation of those it touches. Worth Rises leads the national Connecting Families network of campaigns — supported by hundreds of national, state, and local organizations — to provide fully free communication services to incarcerated people and their loved ones.



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Jail phone call fees extract
\$6 MILLION of wealth
from our communities.
VOTE YES ON INTRO 0741.

Foreword

Every great victory begins with a dream — one that often feels impossible at first. The idea of free communication in prisons and jails was exactly that kind of dream.

For years, incarcerated people and their loved ones had been forced to accept the outrageous cost of calls if they wanted to stay connected — and for many that cost became unbearable, tearing families apart. Those who challenged this exploitation faced steep and often insurmountable barriers. Despite some hard-won legal battles for fair rates, decades of systemic abuse prevented many from dreaming bigger.

It reminds me of my early conversations with Diane Lewis, a Connecticut mother whose son had been incarcerated at just 17. She spent hundreds of dollars each month — an estimated 20 percent of her pay — to stay connected to her son and make sure he had the support he needed to survive his sentence. She borrowed money from other mothers when she needed it and lent what she could when they did. Connection came at a devastating cost that she rarely stopped to consider, let alone dreamed of challenging.

But a year before I met Diane, in 2018, I was approached by an organizer in New York City to lead a legislative

campaign to make phone calls free in our city jails. He had a simple but powerful question: What if families didn't have to go broke just to say, "I love you"? The ask made sense: I founded Worth Rises precisely to end the exploitation of incarcerated people and their loved ones. But we were less than a year old, and this felt like a lot to bite off. Truthfully, I didn't want to lose so early.

I wrestled with the decision, asking myself again and again: if not this, then what? The harm was undeniable, the solution strikingly simple — and if people could see that, perhaps this fight could open the door to challenging the broader prison industry. So, I took a deep breath and accepted the challenge, and that decision, in many ways, came to define us.

We won the campaign in New York City in just three months. It sparked interest in San Francisco, where we won the following year. And then I got a call from a young state representative in Connecticut, Josh Elliott, who wanted to make Connecticut the first state to make prison communication free. The idea was spreading. Soon, I was on late-night calls with mothers, sisters, and daughters all asking, "how can we make this happen here?"



And yet, the path was anything but smooth. Before every victory, there were setbacks, often spurred by an industry willing to use deceit to protect its profits. That brings me back to Diane and our chance encounter in the lobby of the Connecticut State Capitol that marked the beginning of a tough three-year fight. I asked her to dream big with me. Convinced by our winning record, Diane skeptically obliged — and quickly became one of the campaign’s most powerful voices. But we lost before we won and had to wipe away each other’s tears before getting back to work. Then, in 2021, Connecticut became the first state to make all communication free across its prisons.

Today, that once-audacious dream is becoming the new standard. More than 330,000 incarcerated people and their loved ones now have access to fully free phone calls — and in some places, other forms of communication as well. Together, they have made nearly 600 million additional calls, totaling more than six billion additional minutes. And families have saved more than \$620 million. The impact is profound: stronger connections, economic mobility, improved outcomes for children, better mental and physical health, safer facilities, increased participation in rehabilitation, and more successful reentry.

There will be more moments of struggle. The forces we are up against remain powerful. But these victories are an invitation to dream bigger, act bolder, and refuse to accept what has always been as what must be. Because if we could do this — if we could turn an impossible dream into a new reality — then there is far more within our reach than they want us to know.

We are just getting started.

Bianca Tylek
Executive Director, Worth Rises



Executive Summary



That's one thing about these phone calls that you don't get in a letter — *you can hear the smile.*

— SHAWN, INCARCERATED PERSON (CONNECTICUT)

For decades, incarcerated people, their families, and allied advocates have decried the high cost of correctional communication services and its destructive impact on society as a whole. But, in recent years, the tide has turned, and campaigns to not just reduce the cost of communication but make it entirely free to incarcerated people and their families have been successful. In this report, we sought out to evaluate the impact of these free communication policies, collecting, reviewing, and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data from six prison systems and 17 jail systems that have made this change.

What we learned was remarkable: that a smile can be heard and change the course of one's life.

Across the country, when jurisdictions made correctional communication free, something simple but profound happened: incarcerated people began talking to their loved ones more often, for longer, and in more meaningful ways. These behavioral changes were immediate, dramatic, and sustained — there was a welcomed new normal. The result is nearly 600 million

additional calls and 6.4 billion additional minutes of connection to date.

Incarcerated people emerged from isolation and regained a sense of belonging that became an igniting force for self-improvement. Families, who are punished by proximity, experienced life-changing financial and emotional relief. Correctional staff entered markedly calmer and safer work environments. And the public welcomed home people who were more emotionally and logistically prepared to contribute positively to society.

Ultimately, the results demonstrated that a well-designed free communication program for correctional environments is a necessary component of any effective public safety strategy.

KEY FINDINGS



- **Over 330,000 incarcerated people now have access to completely free phone calls** and, in some cases, other communication services, such as video calls and electronic messaging, thanks to advocacy efforts. The full reach of free communication policies, including the loved ones impacted by their incarceration, is estimated to be in the millions but hard to accurately measure.
- **Free communication policies have resulted in nearly 600 million more phone calls and 6.4 billion more minutes of connection to date.** Across the jurisdictions studied, average call usage per person per day increased substantially from 25.1 to 44.8 minutes in prisons and 26.7 to 56.7 minutes in jails, and remained consistently elevated over time, signaling a lasting shift in how people stay connected. The magnitude of the increase was directly correlated to pre-policy call rates — the higher the pre-policy call rate, the more significant the jump in usage. Many jurisdictions also introduced tablets with or near the implementation of free communication, which significantly increased usage.
- **Free communication policies have saved incarcerated people and their families \$622.5 million to date.** Across the state systems studied, savings ranged from \$172 to \$1,801 per incarcerated person per year. Incarcerated people and their families also accrued substantial value from the increase in call time, which ranged from \$244 to \$2,927 per incarcerated person per year. This shift removes a significant recurring financial burden for families that can often least afford it, with an outsized share of those savings flowing to the communities disproportionately impacted by incarceration. More specifically, 70% of prison savings and 82% of jail savings went to Black and brown families. Families reported using the savings to cover important expenses, reduce debt, and invest in their futures, supporting economic stability and mobility.
- **Shifting the cost burden of communication away from families, dramatically reduced its cost.** Every jurisdiction that made communication free was able to do so at a significant discount to the rate incarcerated people and their families were previously paying. Across state prisons, the average discount was 62%, and across jails, the average discount was 68%. The most efficient negotiations produced effective per minute rates between \$0.016 and \$0.024 in prisons and \$0.03 and \$0.04 in jails.
- **All correctional staff recommended that other agencies adopt free communication policies.** Correctional staff describe free communication policies as a security tool, crediting access to free communication with reducing tensions, calming facilities, and making their jobs easier. Seventy-nine percent of incarcerated people also described positive changes in the prison environment once communication became free.

- **Free communication strengthened relationships, improving mental health and renewing commitments to rehabilitation.** Without the financial stressor of paying for calls, communication shifted away from brief, transactional agendas toward ongoing, relational connections that mutually benefitted both incarcerated people and their loved ones. Relationships became rooted in reciprocity that ensured support and accountability flowed both ways. And in doing so, they created a renewed sense of belonging and hope for the future within incarcerated people that encouraged active engagement in their own healing and rehabilitation
- **Incarcerated parents leveraged free communication policies to be more present in the daily lives of their children — though past damage cannot be undone.** Incarcerated parents jumped at the opportunity to show up for their children, whether it be to help with homework or advise on major life decisions. For young children and children with disabilities, this presence played a major role in their development. For all children, these connections are helping to mitigate against the intergenerational harm of parental incarceration. Still, incarcerated parents lamented the years they were disconnected that they could not get back.
- **Free communication helped incarcerated people come home sooner.** Access to free communication gave incarcerated people both the means and purpose to fight for their freedom. With free communication they could participate in their own defense, prepare for a parole hearing, or create a required release plan. Free communication also enabled the relationships that inspired incarcerated people to engage in rehabilitative programs and avoid disciplinary infractions, which often influence early release decisions.
- **Free communication allowed incarcerated people to prepare for reentry and drove positive outcomes after release.** The strong social ties that free communication encouraged allowed incarcerated people to prepare for release. They used their support scaffolds and free calls to coordinate housing, employment, education, and treatment. For these reasons, correctional staff extolled the benefits of free calls as an effective part of public safety budgets, a way for taxpayers to see real public safety returns on their investment.



Introduction



Then it clicked, that I don't have to put money on the phone anymore. I started crying because it was just such a relief. *That's not something I ever have to worry about again.*

— NIA, WIFE OF AN INCARCERATED PERSON (MASSACHUSETTS)

For incarcerated people and their loved ones, phone calls are a lifeline. They provide a way to remain present in one another's lives despite separation. In a system that often isolates and destabilizes, communication is one of the few ways people can continue to show up as parents, partners, and family members. And the impact reaches far beyond prison and jail walls, or even the families and communities most directly affected, into broader society as social ties are necessary for successful reentry and improve public safety.

But across the United States, this connection comes at a grave cost — one that often severs it entirely.

The price of staying in touch shapes the daily lives of those reliant on expensive prison and jail communication for connection with those they love. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people shared the stress of asking family members to replenish their accounts. For families, phone bills are often their largest recurring expenses after housing, forcing tradeoffs between main-

taining connection and meeting basic needs. And the burden of communication costs has not been evenly distributed. These costs have fallen most heavily on Black and brown families and low-income households, compounding the broader economic and social impacts of incarceration.

Nia described the cost of speaking with her husband as second only to rent. Like many others, she balanced that burden alongside the emotional strain of having a loved one incarcerated. But when phone calls became free in Massachusetts, that pressure lifted. Nia was able to stay connected to her husband — and keep her son connected to his father — without taking on debt or sacrificing everyday needs like school activities and basic expenses. What had once been a source of stress became a consistent and reliable part of family life.

In recent years, prison and jail systems across the country have been increasingly implementing similar policies that make communication free for incar-

cerated people and their loved ones, recognizing the multitude of benefits to incarcerated people, impacted families, correctional staff, and the public. People inside are able to stay connected to their loved ones more regularly and more meaningfully. Families on the outside experience relief from both financial strain and the emotional weight of limited contact. Correctional environments are safer, with much less tension. And rehabilitation and reentry are more fruitful, which is critical to improving recidivism and public safety.

What emerges from this research into the impact of these free communication policies is a clear pattern: when the cost of communication is removed, connection expands, relationships strengthen, and families are better able to navigate the challenges of incarceration together toward a promising free future that makes us all safer.

PURPOSE

This report represents the first effort to systematically document the real-world impact of making prison and jail communication free for incarcerated people and their support systems. It presents new, direct evidence of the positive outcomes this policy intervention has had on incarcerated people, their families, correctional staff, and the public, drawing on structured quantitative data and in-depth qualitative interviews across multiple jurisdictions.

While the results are profound, they remain limited in scope as only a handful of states have implemented this commonsense policy. For that reason, this report also serves as a resource — offering clear proof that change is possible and a practical roadmap for advocates, policymakers, and correctional officials working to eliminate the exploitation of incarcerated people and their families nationwide.

SCOPE

The cost of communication in prisons and jails is a complex and wide-ranging issue. This report focuses on a defined set of policy victories and their outcomes, specifically the six prison systems (California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, and the federal system) and over a dozen counties where prison and jail phone calls have been made completely free through the work of Worth Rises and its partners. It captures policies implemented in a variety of ways, including those implemented over individualized tablets, which have significantly expanded access to communication services for incarcerated people by reducing competition for wall phones and expanding calling hours.

Excluded are jurisdictions that offer only a limited number of free calls, where a passed free communication policy had not yet been fully implemented at the time of drafting (i.e., Colorado and Miami-Dade County, Florida), or where Worth Rises was not meaningfully involved (i.e., Alachua County, Florida and Ramsey County, Minnesota).

Notably, while video calls and electronic messaging are important communications methods, newly and increasingly available in carceral settings, and discussed where possible, this report centers on phone calls, as they remain the most widely used form of communication and the service for which we have the most data.

METHODOLOGY

This report draws on a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Some data were publicly available, while others were collected directly by Worth Rises.

Quantitative

For the quantitative analysis, data were gathered through public agencies, public records requests, and open data sources, and often required original analysis of raw datasets. Across jurisdictions, raw datasets varied in format and reporting conventions. Worth Rises obtained new data on key indicators before and after the implementation of free calls, such as the number of calls and call minutes, spending by callers, implementation cost, and more. Where possible, impacts were assessed over a 48-month window (24 months before and 24 months after implementation), with approximately 12 months of pre- and post-policy data available in nearly all cases.

Worth Rises standardized these datasets to enable cross-system comparison by aligning time intervals, aggregating facility-level reporting, and calculating comparable indicators across jurisdictions. Worth Rises also calculated standardized metrics, such as total calls and call minutes, calls and call minutes per incarcerated person per day, and effective price per minute, that allow comparison across systems with different population sizes and communication infrastructures.

Qualitative

For the qualitative analysis, Worth Rises conducted 71 in-depth interviews with 24 incarcerated people (including 10 women and gender non-binary people), 20 formerly incarcerated people (including two professional advocates), 22 family members of incarcerated people, and five correctional staff across California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, and the federal prison system. Interviews were conducted in person, by phone, and via Zoom, using a structured but flexible protocol focused on experiences before and after free calls, with transcripts coded using qualitative analysis software (Dedoose) and analyzed based on key recurring themes. In addition, seven interviews with incarcerated people were carried out over email, but these responses were shorter and were used to inform the development of themes rather than being included as formal observations in the qualitative dataset.

Initial coding grouped excerpts into broad thematic categories (e.g., communication access, family relationships, facility environment, and mental health), which researchers then reviewed to identify recurring descriptive subthemes through inductive qualitative analysis. Interview excerpts were selected to illustrate these themes and represent a range of participant perspectives across roles and jurisdictions, and have been lightly edited for clarity and length while preserving the meaning and voice of participants.

Limitations

Despite our confidence in the conclusions presented in this report, we note the limitations that the carceral environment and context put on research. Some factors — such as mental health, which cannot be analyzed in isolation and were heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic — are addressed using only qualitative data. While secondary sources support and reinforce much of this qualitative evidence, the timeframe and number of overlapping factors make it difficult to substantiate broader claims related to mental and physical health, violence interruption, and disciplinary infractions, among other indicators. In addition, these environments preclude the use of control groups. Interviews with those closest to both the problem and potential solutions are intended to help address these limitations.

Finally, unless otherwise specified, references in this report to “incarcerated people” include individuals who were incarcerated at the time of interview as well as formerly incarcerated individuals reflecting on their experiences during incarceration. Some individuals interviewed while incarcerated have since been released.



“ You can't force a child to say what's going on in 30 minutes...[But] you can you can hear if your child is going through something by the tone of their voice...*With free phone calls, I can call back and get my child to communicate with me.*

— NATAVIA, INCARCERATED PERSON (NEW YORK)



Background

INDUSTRY HISTORY

Up until the early 1980s, AT&T controlled almost the entire correctional telecommunications market much like the broader telecommunications market. Though expensive, the cost of collect calls from prisons and jails at the time was comparable to the cost of such calls outside. However, following the breakup of the AT&T monopoly by federal regulators in 1984, the market opened up to new providers.

Niche correctional telecommunications providers, which previously struggled to sell surveillance services to correctional agencies, entered the space with an uphill battle against the dominant commercial telecommunications firms. To compete, they introduced a revenue sharing model that allowed correctional agencies to collect commissions on call revenue in exchange for exclusive contracts. At a time when ballooning prison populations were straining public budgets, correctional agencies welcomed the new revenue stream.

This model fundamentally reshaped the industry in creating a perverse financial incentive for agencies to select providers offering the highest commissions rather than the lowest rates. In turn, these new correctional

telecommunications providers charged incarcerated people and their families exorbitant rates for phone calls, embedding surveillance costs into those charges. By the mid-1990s, 90% of correctional agencies had entered exclusive contracts with these providers, entrenching the correctional telecommunications industry we know today.

In the early 2000s, private equity firms began to buy into the correctional telecommunications market and drive consolidation. Through a series of mergers and acquisitions, smaller providers were absorbed into a handful of large corporations, including Aventiv (formerly Securus) and ViaPath (formerly Global Tel Link or GTL). Today, the market is highly concentrated, with these firms controlling the overwhelming majority of contracts across prisons and jails. This consolidation reinforced the industry's underlying incentive structure, allowing dominant providers to maintain high prices and expand with limited competitive pressure.

MARKET LANDSCAPE

Today, correctional telecommunications is a \$1.5 billion industry, with three providers owning nearly 90% of the market. The three largest are Aventiv (doing business as Securus and JPay), ViaPath (doing business at Global Tel Link, ConnectNetwork, Telmate, and Getting Out), and Inmate Calling Solutions (also known as IC-Solutions). These firms handle not only phone calls, but the entire spectrum of prison and jail telecommunications, which now also includes video calls and various forms of electronic messaging. Together, Aventiv and ViaPath equally split control of almost 80% of the market, with IC Solutions controlling another roughly 10% and the remainder filled by smaller players.

This concentration of market power is the result of a series of private equity trades over the past 40 years, since the industry's inception. Today, Aventiv is owned by Platinum Equity, ViaPath by American Securities, and IC Solutions by HIG Capital. As part of the private

equity model, many of these acquisitions were financed with significant and at times costly debt, placing pressure on the corporations to maintain handsome profit margins. But, in recent years, regulatory changes, legislative reforms, and corporate accountability campaigns have narrowed these margins, weakening the financial outlook for the providers and making it hard to refinance or sell these businesses. This has led all three of the largest market players into difficult financial deals that define distressed industries. In 2025, Aventiv defaulted on \$1.6 billion in debt and was forced into a debt-for-equity deal with its creditors, who are now slated to take control.

Today, these providers are desperate to reverse the momentum advocates have gained and expand their predatory practices into an increasingly diversified suite of services.

IMPACT ON FAMILIES

Correctional telecommunications corporations have built highly profitable enterprises on the backs of people who can least afford it. Incarcerated people are far more likely than the general population to be low-income, and incarceration itself extracts more than \$9.1 billion each year in lost wages from impacted families, with communities of color bearing a disproportionate share of that harm.¹ Moreover, families with an incarcerated loved one incur nearly \$4,200 annually in related costs, with Black family members paying 2.5 times more than white family members.²

While communication costs are just one part of this extraction from incarcerated people and their communities, they are significant and a particularly burdensome component. In fact, one in three families with an incarcerated loved one goes into debt just trying to stay connected, and 87% of those carrying the financial burden are women.³ This system can trap families in cycles of poverty and incarceration that have generational economic and social impacts.

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I made a contentious effort to make sure I kept my family together. So even if [my husband] went over budget, I would rob Peter to pay Paul.
I made sure the phone lines stayed on.

— LORRAINE, WIFE OF AN INCARCERATED PERSON (NEW YORK)

The prohibitive cost of communication also imposes deep relational and emotional costs. When communication is limited by the ability to pay, people are forced to ration connection, keeping conversations brief, limiting contact, and often forgoing meaningful engagement. Incarcerated people and their families report engaging in an “emotional balancing act”, censoring their emotions and avoiding complex topics in a profoundly damaging cost-benefit calculation. And then there are the relationships that were never sustained because the cost of connection was too high. This isolation strains mental

health, weakens family bonds, and creates barriers to relationships people rely on to rebuild their lives.

These costs are borne not only by incarcerated people and their loved ones, but by society as a whole. Families stripped of resources are more likely to require reliance on public support systems and incarcerated people with weaker family and community connections may struggle to reintegrate into the community successfully to the detriment of themselves, their families, and the broader public.

ADVOCACY WINS

Since the late 1990s, there have been efforts to challenge the high cost of prison and jail communication through litigation, regulation, and organizing. While meaningful wins were recorded, systemic change was harder to secure. But these early efforts, led in large part by families and supported by legal and grassroots advocates, brought national attention to the issue and laid the foundation for future change.

Perhaps the most persistent was Martha Wright-Reed, a grandmother fed up with paying the high cost of calls with her incarcerated grandson. Her 2001 lawsuit would eventually become the catalyst for regulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), a process that started in 2012 and has made massive strides since, despite facing headwinds along the way. In fact, when a 2017 court decision limited the FCC’s regulatory au-

thority to only long distance calls — which make up just 20% of all prison and jail calls — advocates successfully pressured Congress to pass the Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act to enshrine and even expand the FCC’s regulatory authority over all correctional phone and video calling services.

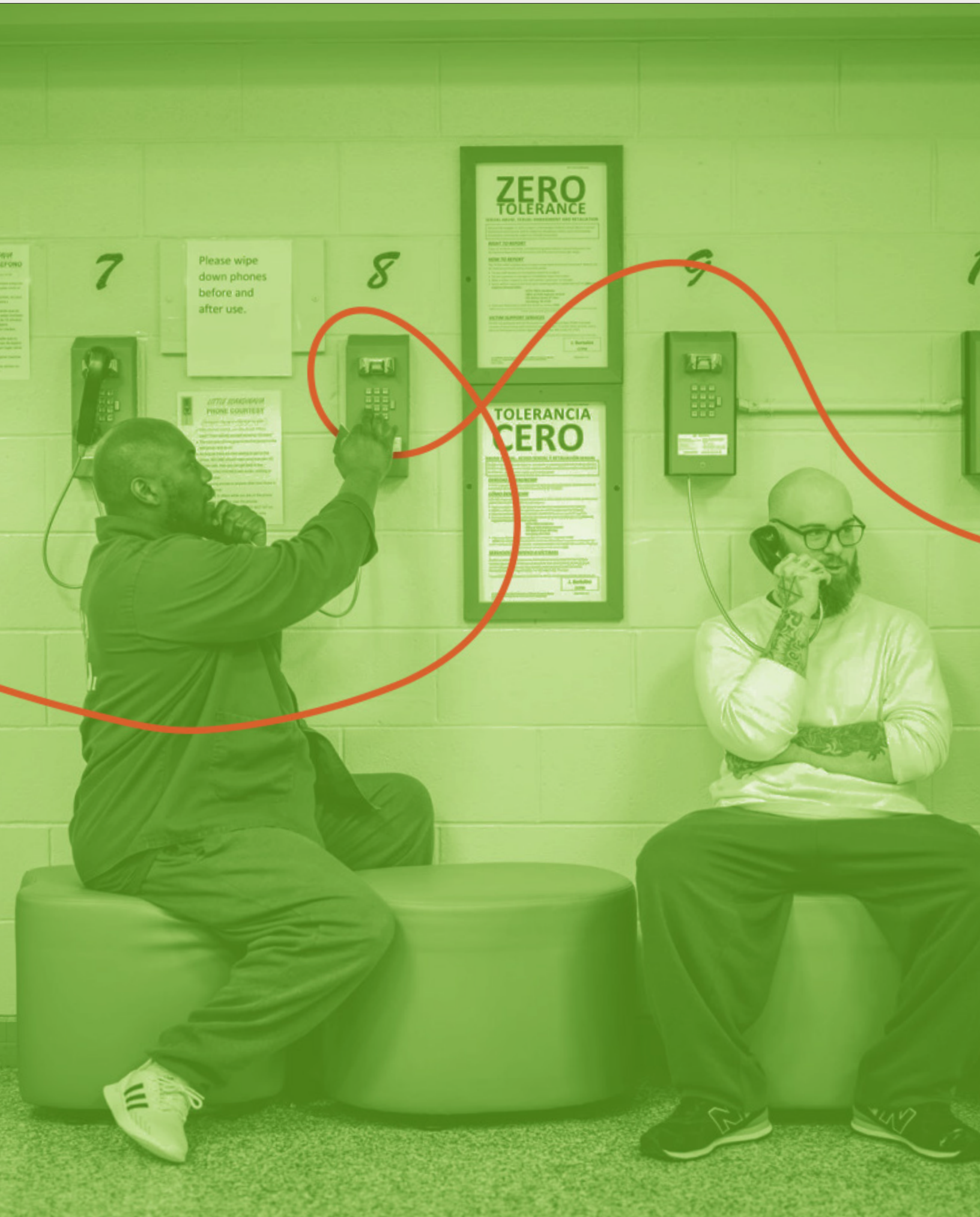
Building on this historical work — much of which continues today — Worth Rises’ Connecting Families initiative has exponentially accelerated progress in recent years by successfully pushing policymakers to completely eliminate the cost of staying connected for incarcerated people and their loved ones. The lesson is clear: providing free communication in prisons and jails is a viable policy that can have a transformative impact at the individual, family, community, and societal level.

¹Brian Elderbroom, Peter Mayer, and Felicity Rose. We Can’t Afford It. Mass Incarceration and the Family Tax. FWD.us. June 2025. <https://www.wecantaffordit.us/pdf/We%20Can't%20Afford%20It%20Report%20-%20FWD.us.pdf>

²Ibid

³Saneta deVuono-powell, Chris Schweidler, Alicia Walters, and Azadeh Zohrabi. Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families. Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design. 2015. <https://ellabakercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Who-Pays-FINAL.pdf>

JURISDICTION	EFFECTIVE YEAR	COVERED FACILITIES	POLICY MECHANISM	POLICY
New York City, NY	2019	City jail	Legislation	Free phone calls
San Francisco, CA	2020	County jail	Legislation	Free phone calls
Federal Bureau of Prisons	2020	Federal prisons	Legislation (CARES Act)	Free phone calls (after expiration of CARES Act, requirement instituted that person be signed up for a program)
San Diego, CA	2021	County jail	Legislation	Free phone calls
Connecticut	2022	State prisons (unified jail system)	Legislation	Free communication, including phone calls, video calls, and electronic messaging
Ramsey County, MN	2022	County jail	Administrative action	Free phone calls
California	2023	State prisons	Legislation	Free phone calls
Alachua County, FL	2023	County jail	Legislation	Free phone calls
Minnesota	2023	State prisons	Legislation	Free phone calls
Massachusetts	2023	State prisons and county jails	Legislation	Free communication, including phone calls, video calls, and electronic messaging
Los Angeles, CA	2023	County jail	Legislation	Free phone calls
New York	2025	State prisons	Administrative action	Free phone calls
Miami-Dade County, FL	2026	County jail	Legislation	Free phone calls
Colorado	2026 (pending)	State prisons	Legislation	Free phone calls



Findings

In evaluating the impact of free communication policies, we reviewed and analyzed financial and behavioral data and interviewed over 70 people impacted by these policies, including currently and formerly incarcerated people, family members with incarcerated loved ones, and correctional staff. This quantitative and qualitative data clearly demonstrated that when communication is free, incarcerated people spend more time connecting with their loved ones, and their conversations change lives, with many broader societal benefits.

Across the jurisdictions studied, the data showed consistent impacts from free communication policies. People inside are able to connect more regularly with their loved ones and plan for a free future. Families on the outside experience significant financial relief. Relationships that might otherwise strain or break are able to hold, and in many cases grow stronger. Parents remain more present in their children's lives. Participants point to clear improvements in mental and emotional wellbeing, making conditions inside facilities calmer and more stable.

These effects are not isolated. Participants describe how these changes reinforce one another — stronger relationships support wellbeing, reduced stress improves facility environments, and sustained connection helps people prepare for release. When people re-

turn home, they do so with stronger relationships and a more stable foundation for rebuilding their lives, which are critical to reentry success.

After an in-depth analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, eight findings emerged as the impacts of free communications policies: increased connection, financial relief, stronger family and community relationships, parenting and child development, improved mental and physical health, reduced violence and disciplinary infractions, increased rehabilitation, and reentry planning and success. While each finding is discussed distinctly, the data consistently showed these effects as interconnected, with changes in one domain shaping outcomes in others.

Removing the cost of communication produces measurable changes that extend beyond individual experience, strengthening families, stabilizing institutions, and supporting safer, more connected communities that include the people returning home.

FINDING

1.

INCREASED *Connection*

Today, more than 330,000 incarcerated people have access to free phone calls thanks to free communication policies in their jurisdictions. To date, these policies have enabled nearly 600 million additional calls and 6.4 billion additional call minutes between incarcerated people and their loved ones. That is hundreds of millions more chances to say “I love you” and billions more minutes of laughter, shared moments, and connection.

When the cost barrier to communication was removed, connection increased immediately, dramatically, and durably across every system studied, making it clear that existing, exploitative pricing structures were needlessly suppressing incarcerated people’s ability to connect with loved ones. Once calls were made free, incarcerated people and their loved ones used that restored access broadly and deeply.

Participants described a fundamental shift in how they communicated. Before the implementation of free communication policies, calls were structured and tightly managed around cost, with people describing how they would limit calls, ration minutes, or cut conversations short. As Candace, who is incarcerated in New York, explained, “before, we would be stressed... you can only call this many times,” and so when loved ones “really needed us, we couldn’t be there for them.” After implementation, participants describe being able to stay on the phone longer, return to fuller conversations, and engage without watching the clock. As Mike, who is also incarcerated in New York, described conversations as “better... because I’m not looking at a clock saying, how much did that cost them today.”

This change has also been recognized by correctional administrators. New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision Commissioner Daniel F. Martuscello III noted that “Since implementing the free

330,000

Incarcerated people with access to fully free phone calls

600 million

Additional calls made from incarcerated people to their loved ones

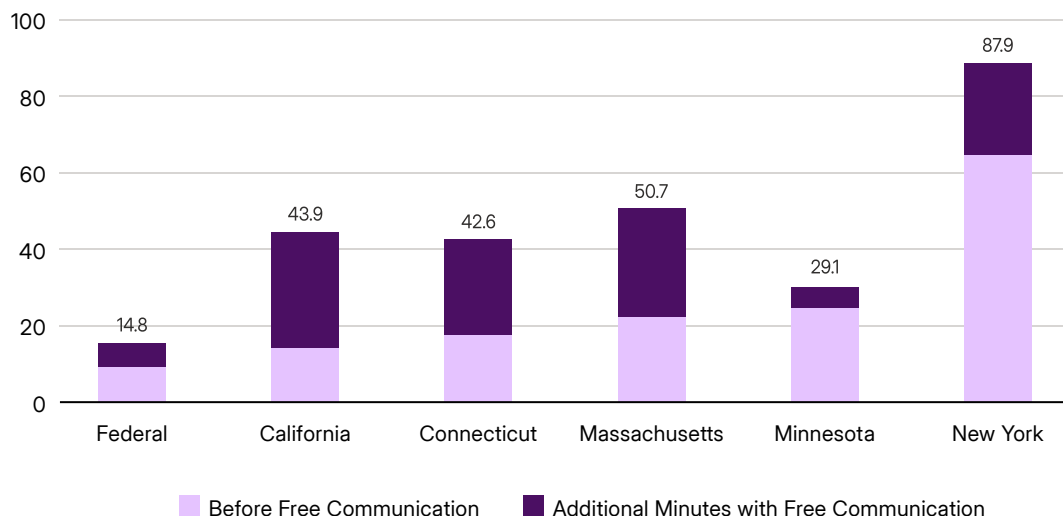
6.4 billion

Additional call minutes between incarcerated people and their loved ones

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

On average, people in prison used the phone 44.8 minutes per day after free communication policies were implemented, compared to 25.1 minutes per day before, a 79% increase. However, notably, average per person per day usage ranged from 14.8 (federal) to 87.9 (New York) minutes due to differences in institutional policies, communication infrastructure, and regional culture.

Call Minutes Per Person in Prisons



Institutional policies that shape access to communication such as caps on call time or restrictive time windows when calls are allowed expectedly impact usage. For example, while most agencies with free communication policies do not cap access to phone calls, the Federal Bureau of Prisons allows each incarcerated person only 500 minutes each month, which significantly suppresses usage as shown by usage rates from other jurisdictions with more liberal access policies. In contrast, while Connecticut also limits calls, its cap of 90 minutes per person per day is more than double the state’s average daily use, suggesting the cap has a negligible restrictive impact.

longer have to wait for shared wall phones and can make calls while confined to their cells. In California, where tablets were rolled out simultaneously with the implementation of its free communication policy, per person call volume jumped 208% as two critical barriers to connection were lifted: cost and accessibility.

Differences in communication infrastructure, like the ratio of communication devices to incarcerated people, also impact usage. Many jurisdictions implemented free communication policies with the rollout of individual calling-enabled tablets, which considerably drove usage. With personal tablets, incarcerated people no

When the impact of tablet rollouts was neutralized, generally jurisdictions with higher call rates prior to the implementation of free communication policies saw the highest increases in call volume. For example, Connecticut, where people paid an average of \$0.238 per minute for phone calls prior to the state’s implementation of free communication, saw an increase of 142% in per person usage when phone calls became free. Conversely, New York, where people paid just under \$0.03 per minute for calls, saw a more modest increase of 38% after the policy’s implementation, illustrating the direct correlation between call rates and call usage.



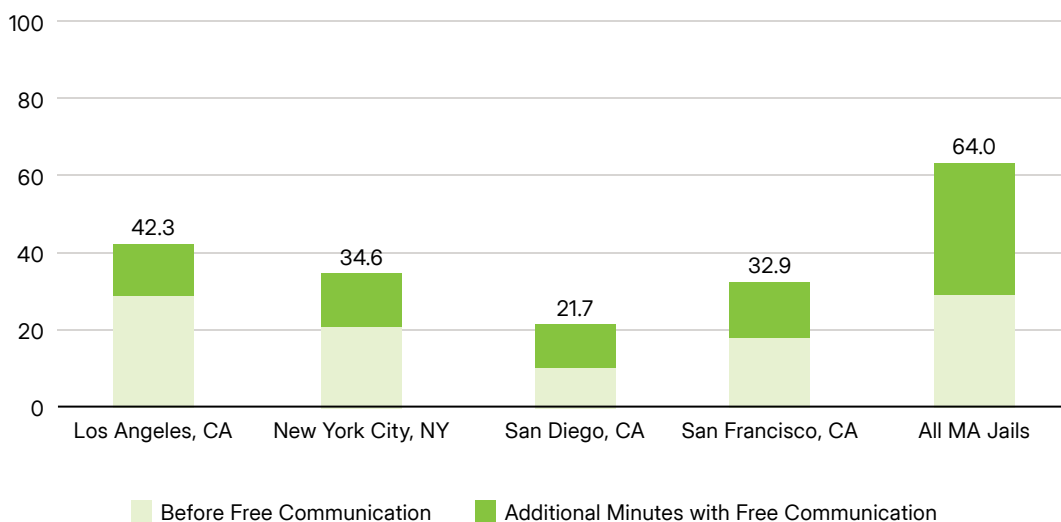
He was standing in line waiting for people that he had never even seen use a phone. These old guys who never call anybody are suddenly getting in line. *He saw people crying.*

— BRASHANI, WIFE OF AN INCARCERATED PERSON (MASSACHUSETTS)

This pattern held true in jails, where the increase in call volume after free communication policies were implemented was slightly more pronounced, with per person per day usage jumping 112% from 26.7 to 56.7 minutes, presumably given the less structured nature of jails and the urgent needs of people incarcerated recently and

pre-trial. Again, usage was highest where the population had access to personal tablets (i.e., Los Angeles and Massachusetts jails) and usage increases were steepest for jails that had high call rates before the policy implementation.

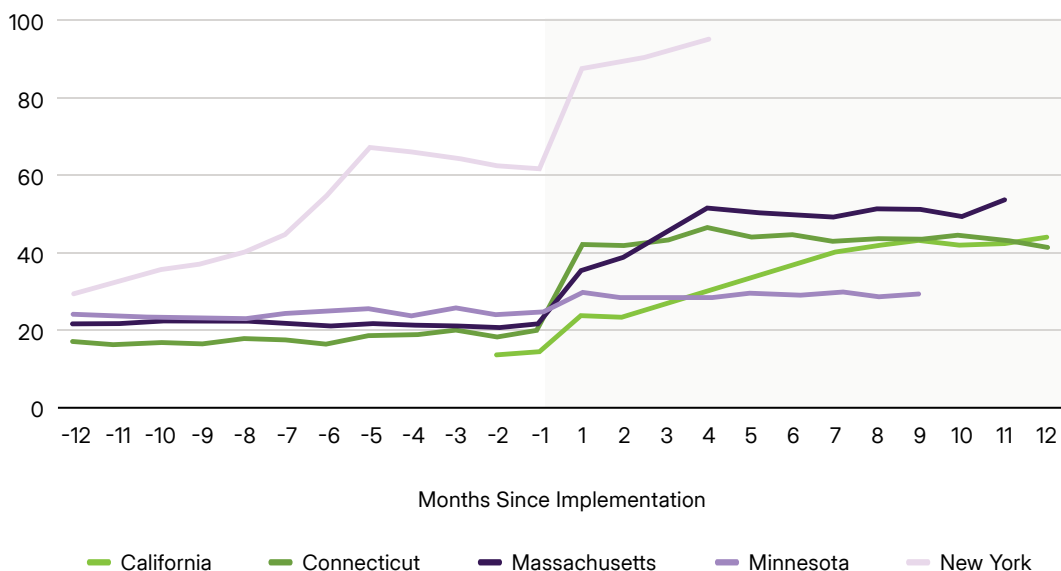
Call Minutes Per Person in Jails



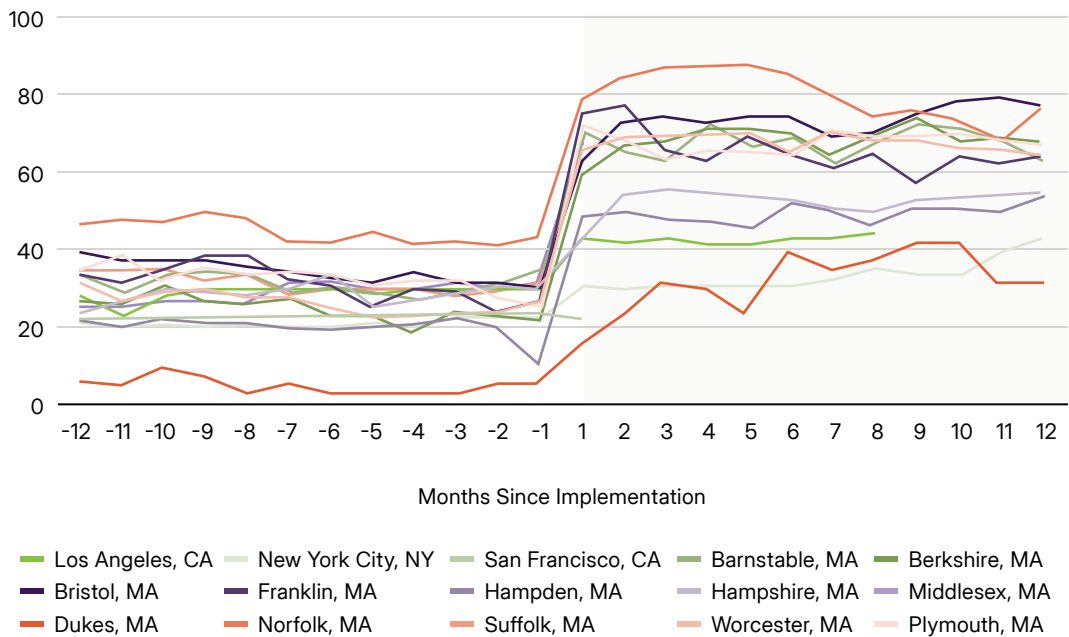
Importantly, these increases were sustained beyond the initial rollout period. What may appear as an initial spike reflects a new and consistently higher baseline, rather than a temporary surge driven by attention or novelty. In some jurisdictions, usage took time to

reach this new level, particularly where free calls were introduced alongside tablets. Across systems, however, once access expanded, communication stabilized at this higher level, indicating a lasting behavioral and cultural shift in how people stay connected.

Call Minutes Per Person Per Day in Prisons



Call Minutes Per Person Per Day in Jails



Participants also emphasized that access to free communication reduced inequities in support within facilities. Once calls became free, many described seeing people who had previously been isolated — cut off from their support system — reconnect with loved ones. Access to connection became less dependent on family income and more evenly distributed across the population. Brashani, whose husband is incarcerated in Massachusetts, recalled her husband “standing in line waiting for people that he had never even seen use a phone. These old guys who never call anybody are suddenly getting in line. He saw people crying.”

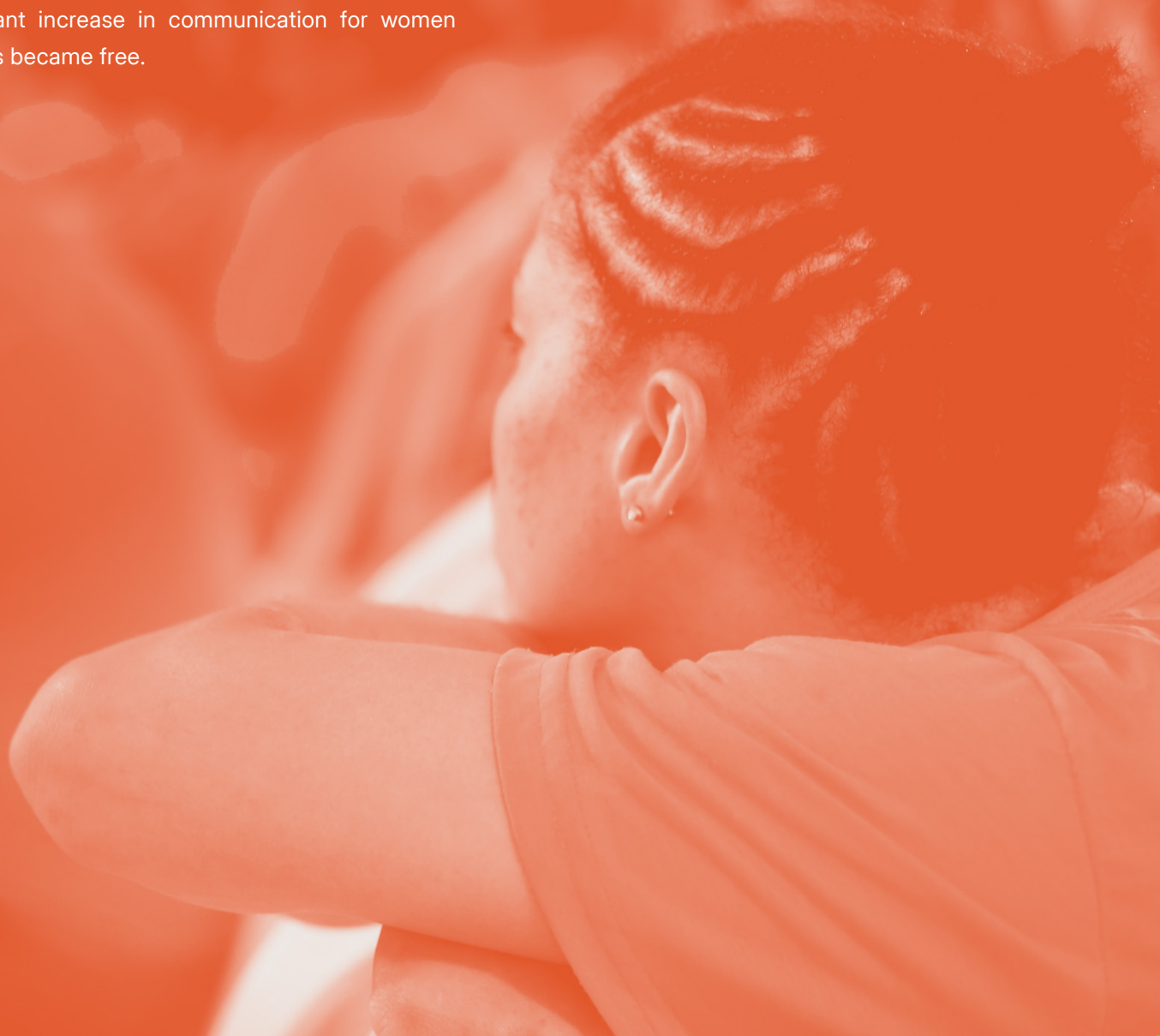
Beyond the numbers, participants described an increase in the quality of their connections, noting a broader shift toward ongoing, relational connections. Conversations moved from compressed pragmatic agendas to sustained, everyday interaction — sitting

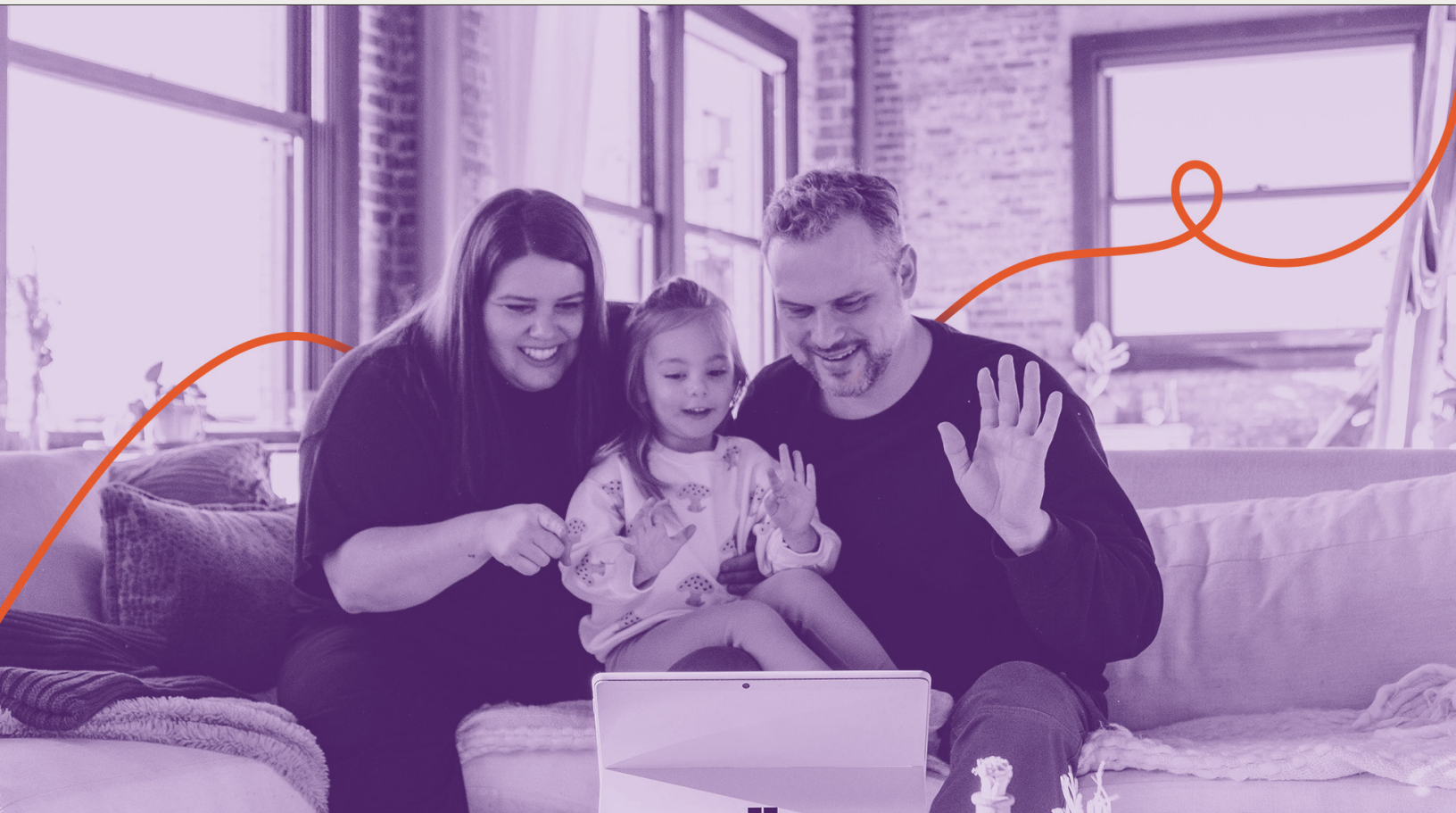
on the phone while a child does homework, watching a movie simultaneously, listening to a sports game together, engaging in prayer or Bible study, or simply remaining connected without urgency. Lorraine, whose husband is incarcerated in New York, explained how free calls allowed her husband to be present for the rhythms of daily life. “He’s not missing anything now. He’s more involved with the day-to-day... even listening to me wash dishes or load the dishwasher... removes him from the hardships of prison.”

Together, these accounts underscore what the data shows at scale: when cost barriers are removed, connection increases not only in volume, but in meaning — allowing incarcerated people to remain more consistently present in the lives of their families and communities.

Gender Disparities

While the increase in communication resulting from free communication policies was widespread across geographies and facility types, it was not experienced equally across all populations. Data from New York prisons illustrates gender disparities in communication patterns. In the three months following implementation, incarcerated women spoke on the phone significantly less than men, averaging 35% fewer calls per person per day and 45% fewer minutes per person per day. This disparity reflects a broader issue: incarcerated women often have less outside support from family and community networks. As Pamela, an incarcerated woman in New York, explained, “unfortunately, a lot of family relationships break up when women are incarcerated... a lot of women are left alone.” Still, there was a significant increase in communication for women when calls became free.





Video Calls and Electronic Messages

Phone calls are by far the most utilized communication modality in prisons and jails. Only two jurisdictions have free communication policies that cover services other than phone calls: Connecticut and Massachusetts. More robust data from Massachusetts prisons and jails, shows that increases in these services were often steeper than increases in phone calls, but largely because these services are used less frequently.

For perspective, incarcerated people in Massachusetts prisons and jails spend just 5% of the time they spend on phone calls on video calls. This is largely because of the inconvenient structure of video calls in prisons and jails — they have to be scheduled in advance. Before the introduction of free communication, incarcerated people generally made less than one video call per month, which jumped to an average of five calls per month after. While a significant increase, the overall use of video calls remained low, ranging from half hour

to four hours per person per month. Should the structure of video calls change such that they can be used like phone calls, without advanced scheduling, usage would likely increase.

Electronic messaging — designed to resemble either text messages or email — is becoming increasingly popular in correctional environments. Drawing again from Massachusetts data, free communication policies led to a doubling of usage in prisons and more than a sevenfold increase in jails. This disparity likely reflects differences in population composition, as incarcerated people in prisons tend to be older and serving longer sentences, making them less familiar with messaging technology. However, overall usage remained relatively low, with people sending between one and four messages per day on average after communication became free.

FINDING

2.

FINANCIAL *Relief*

For decades, correctional telecommunications providers have charged incarcerated people and their families exorbitant per minute rates and added fees to stay in touch. Given the remarkably low wages, if any, paid to incarcerated people, it is often families on the outside who bear this cost. And since incarcerated people are far more likely than the general population to be low-income, these costs often fall on households with limited financial means that have already been destabilized by the incarceration of a family member. One in three families goes into debt trying to stay connected through calls and visits, and 87% of those carrying the financial burden are women.⁴

Tricia, who spent years supporting her brother in prison in New York, was one of those women and reflected on the heavy financial burden that families shoulder: “When a loved one goes away, [we] have to deal with commissary costs, visits, gas and tolls, and hotels, and then you just want to talk to them. Where is there a break for the loved one who had no say?”

But free communication policies have lifted this major financial burden for families with incarcerated loved ones in some jurisdictions. Across the jurisdictions studied, policies making prison and jail phone calls free for incarcerated people have saved families \$622.5 million to date. That is hundreds of millions of dollars that families have been able to use instead to navigate the financial strain of a loved one’s incarceration and plan for the future.

\$622 million

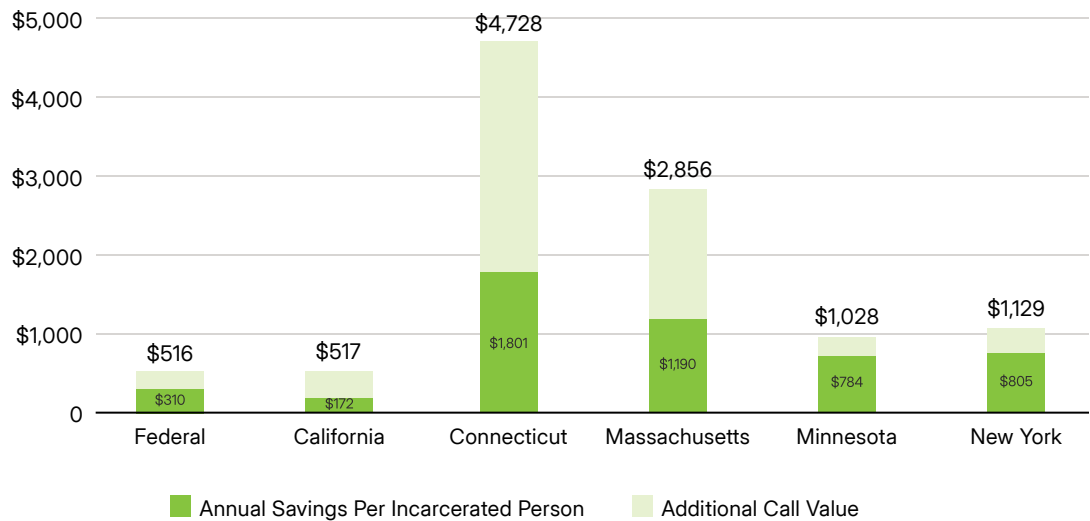
Saved in communication costs by families of incarcerated people

⁴ Saneta deVuono-powell, Chris Schweidler, Alicia Walters, and Azadeh Zohrabi. *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*. Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design. 2015. <https://ellabakercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Who-Pays-FINAL.pdf>

In state systems, the savings families experienced ranged from \$172 per year in California, where calls were \$0.025 per minute previously and limited by sparse physical infrastructure, to \$1,801 per year in Connecticut, where calls had averaged \$0.238 per minute before becoming free. Beyond these savings, families have also accrued significant value from the

increased call time they are using with their incarcerated loved ones. For instance, if families in Connecticut spent as much time communicating with their incarcerated loved ones before the free communication policy was implemented as they do now, they would have spent an average of \$4,728 per year, suggesting an accrued value of \$2,927 per year.

Annual Savings Per Incarcerated Loved One in Prison



Racial Disparities

Because Black and brown communities are disproportionately incarcerated, Black and brown families have borne the financial burden of correctional communication costs most heavily. It is therefore appropriate that they have realized the bulk of the savings generated by free calls, with an estimated 73% of total savings to date, or \$455.8 million, flowing to Black and brown families.

- 35% of prison savings and 42% of jail savings flowed to Black families
- 31% of prison savings and 36% of jail savings flowed to Latine families
- 70% of prison savings and 82% of jail savings flowed to non-white families





I can now put [the money] towards something like our bills. . . *to have somewhat of a normal life out here.*

— ABBY, WIFE OF AN INCARCERATED PERSON (CALIFORNIA)

These savings represent not only financial but also emotional health benefits, alleviating guilt, stress, and shame. Michael, who was formerly incarcerated in New York, described the emotional burden as “a sense of embarrassment and shame” that comes along with needing financial support from your family. “I hate asking for money,” he said. But when free communication policies were implemented, participants repeatedly described feeling a “weight lifted.” Abby, whose husband is incarcerated in California, sighed a breath of relief, saying she could now “put [the money] towards something like our bills... to have somewhat of a normal life out here.”

For some, those first few free phone calls required a psychological adjustment. Nia, whose husband, with whom she shares a 13-year-old son, is incarcerated in Massachusetts, explained the emotional rollercoaster she faced in that first week when he called: “I was in a panic because [I’m thinking] I don’t have a lot of money right now; I don’t get paid for another week. And I’m getting ready to tell him, ‘you can’t call back anymore today, you’ve already called like four times’ — and then it clicked, I don’t have to put money on the phone anymore. I started crying, because it was just such a relief.”

The increased financial stability families experienced with the implementation of free communication policies also proved critical in helping them and their loved ones prepare for release. Brashani from Massachusetts said that the money she saved when her husband was incarcerated allowed them to think differently about the next phase of their lives: “We have been able to take that money and put it into a down payment for a mortgage. So we’re not there yet, but we have been looking around. And in just the couple of years that the phone calls have been free, we’ve already saved \$10,000 to put towards our future life together.”

The new financial capacity created by free communication policies did not sit idle. Families used it to cover important expenses, reduce debt, and invest in their future, driving many toward economic stability and even economic mobility.

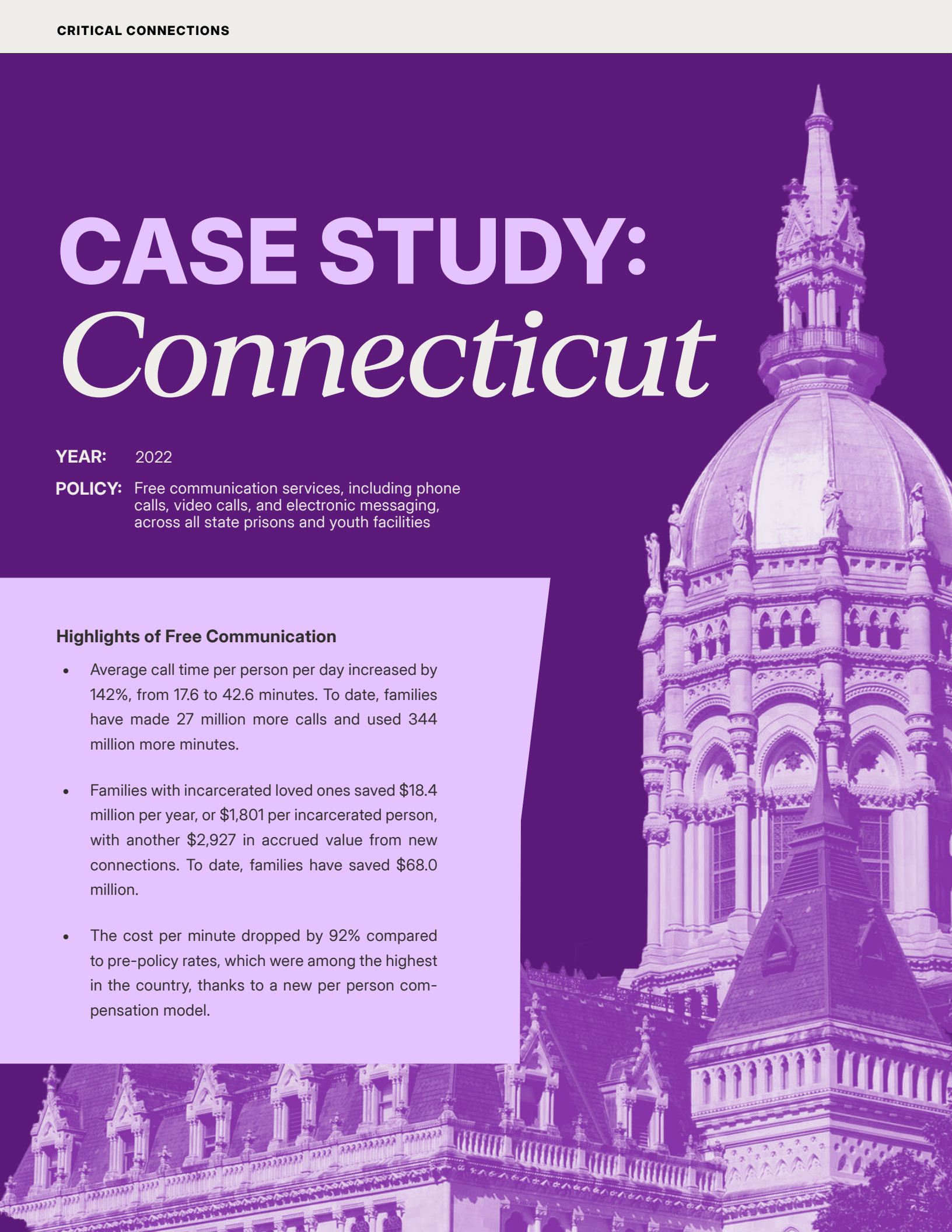
CASE STUDY: *Connecticut*

YEAR: 2022

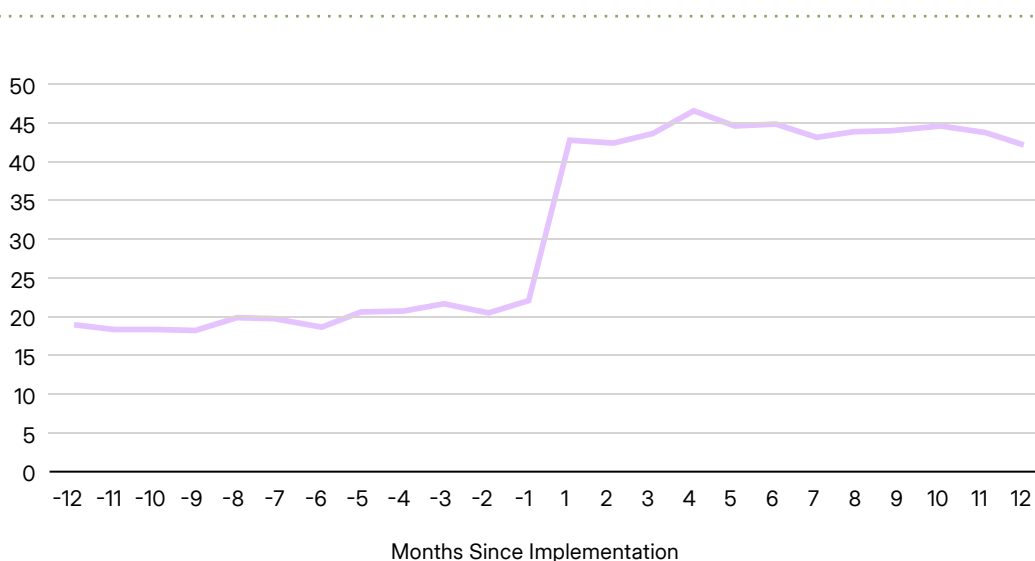
POLICY: Free communication services, including phone calls, video calls, and electronic messaging, across all state prisons and youth facilities

Highlights of Free Communication

- Average call time per person per day increased by 142%, from 17.6 to 42.6 minutes. To date, families have made 27 million more calls and used 344 million more minutes.
- Families with incarcerated loved ones saved \$18.4 million per year, or \$1,801 per incarcerated person, with another \$2,927 in accrued value from new connections. To date, families have saved \$68.0 million.
- The cost per minute dropped by 92% compared to pre-policy rates, which were among the highest in the country, thanks to a new per person compensation model.



Call Minutes Per Person Per Day



Connecticut became the first state in the country to make prison communication free when Senate Bill 972 was signed into law in 2021 and implemented in 2022. The legislation made all communication services free, including phone calls, video calls, and electronic messaging, with 90 minutes of call time per day guaranteed. Given the state’s unified correctional system that holds both pretrial and sentenced individuals in state facilities, the legislation made communication free for everyone incarcerated in Connecticut. The legislation also ensured that visits cannot be replaced by communication technology.

Connecticut renegotiated its existing contract with Securus, under which families were paying between \$0.235 and \$0.325 per minute, to pay a fixed monthly rate of \$30 per incarcerated person for phone calls and \$15 per person for electronic messaging. Connecticut is the only jurisdiction to utilize this payment model, and while it may better reflect how people in the free world pay for communication services, without having gone through a competitive bidding process, the state is likely overpaying for these services. Still, the model paid off because it kept costs down despite a significant jump in call volume after implementation, which was expected given the high rates that families had been previously charged and the simultaneous rollout of calling-enabled tablets.

Today, Connecticut is spending roughly \$3.9 million on phone calls and \$1.9 million on electronic messaging annually, about 20% more than the state budgeted. However, this is largely driven by an increase in the prison population of nearly 10% since the policy has gone into effect, which multiplies the impact of the increase in the average daily per person usage. Further, if the state initiated a competitive procurement process, it could get its service costs down as the effective rates it is paying for both phone calls and electronic messaging, based on volume, are higher than those of other comparably situated agencies.

THE COST OF *Free Communication*

At first, when I heard taxpayers were paying for it, I was against it. But after seeing the population and their reaction, and their positive nature toward staff, *I say give it a shot.*

— FELIX, PRISON COUNSELOR (NEW YORK)

Free communication policies shift agency incentives in important ways. When governments, rather than families, bear the cost of communication, there is greater scrutiny of pricing models, contract terms, and service quality. Agencies begin to redefine their vendor relationships and negotiate more aggressively. In this context, providing free communication services to incarcerated people has become an incredibly cost-effective correctional program.

Every jurisdiction that implemented a free communication policy saw a discount in the cost of calls after procuring a new contract or renegotiating its existing contract. State prisons, on average, had rates discounted by 62%, and local jails, on average, had rates discounted 68% from what families paid (including fees and taxes) to what the agency now pays. This data clearly demon-

strates that correctional telecommunications providers are grossly overcharging families for their services and are profitable at far lower rates.

However, the cost of providing free communication in prisons and jails varied widely, depending primarily on how effectively agencies negotiated service contracts during implementation. New York and California negotiated the best rates at \$0.015⁵ and \$0.016 per minute, respectively. Connecticut negotiated a monthly rate per person of \$30 for unlimited calling, which translates to an effective rate of \$0.023 per minute based on reported call volume and is comparable to Minnesota's negotiated rate of \$0.024 per minute. Massachusetts stands alone at \$0.0799 per minute, the highest negotiated rate by far.⁶

⁵ New York pays \$0.015 per minute for calls and separately for the live monitoring of a uniquely high percentage of calls. If the additional cost is added in, the effective per minute rate becomes \$0.019 per minute.

⁶ Massachusetts' rate structure uniquely rolls video into the "phone" rate. The state corrections department pays \$0.0799 per minute for phone calls, of which \$0.0399 covers phone service, \$0.0100 covers video calls, \$0.0100 covers video equipment, and \$0.0200 covers security features. It is unclear why the agency agreed to pay for video calls based on phone call volume, which tends to be much higher. Under this model, the state is effectively paying more than \$0.70 per minute for video calls. This contract was also the basis of the contract for many of the state's counties, some of which also included electronic messaging, digitized mail scanning, and still other costs in their "phone" rate.

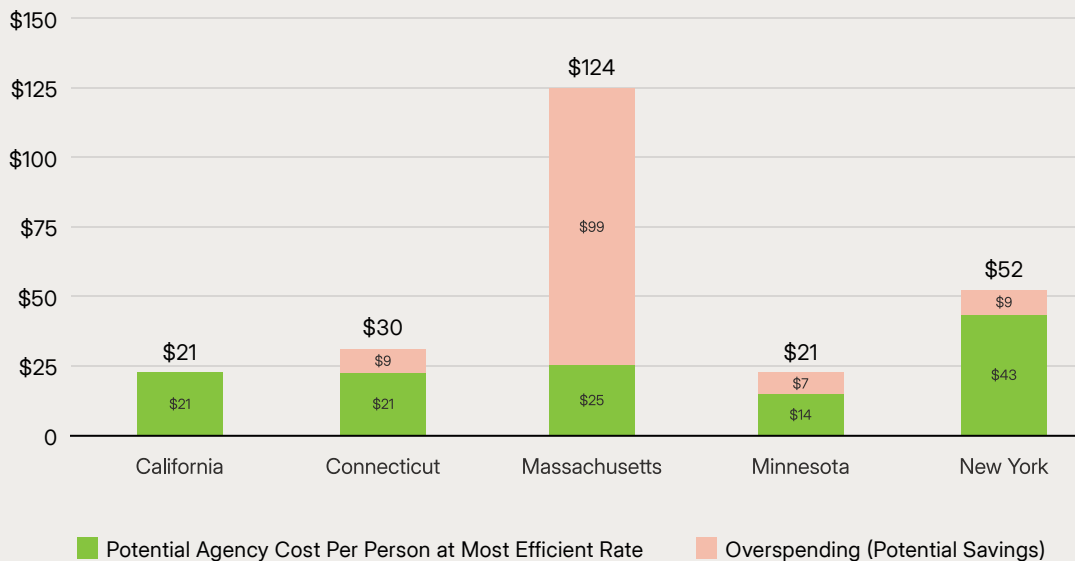
JURISDICTION	AVERAGE RATE FOR FAMILIES PRE POLICY	EFFECTIVE RATE FOR FAMILIES PRE POLICY (INCLUDING FEES AND TAXES)	EFFECTIVE RATE FOR AGENCY POST POLICY	DISCOUNT
PRISONS				
California	\$0.025 per minute	\$0.032 per minute	\$0.016 per minute	51%
Connecticut	\$0.238 per minute	\$0.304 per minute	\$0.023 per minute	92%
Massachusetts	\$0.120 per minute	\$0.154 per minute	\$0.0799 per minute ⁶	48%
Minnesota	\$0.075 per minute	\$0.094 per minute	\$0.024 per minute	74%
New York	\$0.028 per minute	\$0.035 per minute	\$0.019 per minute ⁵	45%
JAILS				
Los Angeles, CA	\$0.070 per minute	\$0.090 per minute	\$0.040 per minute	56%
New York City, NY	\$0.50 first minute + \$0.05 per additional minute	\$0.166 per minute	\$0.030 per minute	82%
San Francisco, CA	\$0.181 per minute	\$0.181 per minute	\$0.030 per minute ⁷	84%
Massachusetts jails	\$0.163 per minute	\$0.163 per minute	\$0.072 per minute ⁶	56%

⁷ This analysis reflects San Francisco's model at implementation. San Francisco paid \$89.78 per month per wall phone line. The effective rate is calculated using the number of phone lines and usage as provided by the San Francisco Sheriff's Office.

If call volume is factored in, California has the lowest implementation cost for free communication at \$21 per person per month. Other jurisdictions could save millions by negotiating comparable rates. For example, Massachusetts, which currently pays \$124 per person per month to provide free phone calls, could cut annual costs by 80%. Together, the five prison systems that have implemented free calling policies could save

a cumulative \$46.2 million annually if they renegotiated to the most cost-efficient per minute rate secured to date. Notably, however, California's rate is not the best rate available; states like Illinois and New Hampshire, and even localities like Dallas County, Texas, which still charge families for calls, have lower per minute rates.

Agency Cost Per Person Per Month for Phone Calls in Prisons



Ultimately, even with the clear success of free communications policies, there remains significant room for agencies to improve on negotiations and secure more cost-effective contracts to ensure that taxpayer dollars are deployed responsibly. Implemented well, free communications policies are worth every dollar. As Justin Oles, Deputy Warden at a Connecticut prison, reflect-

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

See Recommendations for more on how jurisdictions can minimize implementation costs through effective contract negotiation.

FINDING

3.

STRONGER FAMILY *and* Community Relationships



Any loved one or family member is *doing the sentence together*. I need to feel [my husband] in my life, so that there is hope.

— BRASHANI, WIFE OF AN INCARCERATED PERSON (MASSACHUSETTS)

Maintaining, and even expanding, social ties is critical for incarcerated people and their successful rehabilitation and reentry. These connections are also immensely important to the people who love them and experience incarceration alongside them. Incarcerated people and their loved ones expressed needing each other, debunking the myth that connection is simply about support for the incarcerated person — it is, in fact, a two way road, or mutual support.

However, family and other community relationships are often strained by distance, constraint, and cost. For many, staying connected requires navigating not only physical separation, but a system that has historically limited how and when communication is allowed and charged exorbitant costs for communication services. As a result, relationships become fragmented — shaped by access restrictions and financial pressure — and often fracture.

Under these conditions, participants described needing to ration conversations: making calls less frequently, cutting calls short, and spending call time prioritizing only the most urgent matters. Participants reported having to go days, weeks, or even months between calls to children, parents, and other loved ones. Many described communication that was constrained and transactional, often focused on logistics or immediate needs rather than ongoing connection. For some, the tone of these calls caused stress that made them simply not want to call home.

But when the cost of communication was removed, that dynamic shifted. Free communication was consistently credited with strengthening and repairing relationships, making this the most common theme identified in interviews. Ninety-three percent of incarcerated people and 82% of family members mentioned that having access to free communication helped build or

repair relationships with loved ones, which correctional staff also reported observing.

Participants described rekindling relationships that had broken. In some cases, this meant reconnecting after years of disconnection, with participants describing people resuming relationships with children they had not spoken to in years and even meeting grandchildren for the first time. Dwayne, who is incarcerated in Connecticut, shared, “I [hadn’t] heard from my daughter in over 10 years when I got her letter with a phone number... [Then] when I heard her voice, it killed me. I told her I love her, and that I’m going to keep in contact with her. I talk to her everyday.” There were many more like Dwayne, as Paul, who is incarcerated in New York, witnessed, “You had people adding phone numbers [onto their approved lists] because now they could call people they couldn’t call before due to money issues.”

I [hadn’t] heard from my daughter in over 10 years when I got her letter with a phone number... [Then] when I heard her voice, it killed me. I told her I love her, and that I’m going to keep in contact with her.

I talk to her everyday.

— DWAYNE, INCARCERATED PERSON
(CONNECTICUT)

With the burden of cost lifted, communication became more consistent and less time constrained, allowing relationships to develop more naturally rather than in brief, intermittent exchanges. As Robert, who was formerly incarcerated in Los Angeles, described, access to free calls meant “you’re not just calling just to ask for something,” but instead able to build and maintain relationships more fully. Lacey, who is incarcerated in New York, explained that conversations shifted from “just the highlights of the week” to everyday life — “TV shows, music, the weather, the little moments... we talk about everything now.”

With more time and fewer constraints, participants described returning to the roles and rhythms of everyday life. They spoke about sitting on the phone while children completed homework, sharing prayer, watching movies together, or simply staying connected without urgency. They emphasized knowing what is happening in their families’ lives in real time — including school updates, illnesses, milestones, and moments of crisis — and being able to respond as those events unfold. These moments, while ordinary, allow relationships to be sustained in ways that mirror life outside incarceration.

Incarcerated people also welcomed the opportunity to be there for their loved ones in ways they regretted not being able to previously. Rather than primarily reaching out for assistance, many described being able to offer guidance, emotional support, and care as the needs of their loved ones arise — and this reciprocity was an important change to their relationships. Hamza, who was incarcerated in Massachusetts, explained: “I didn’t feel like I’m looking at the time [and need] to hurry up and get through everything that I want to share within a 20-minute phone call. They can speak, and I can actually hear my family, loved ones, or friends vent about issues that they’re having. I could literally just listen to them. I didn’t have to rush or interject.”

Family members on the outside appreciated the additional calls, which now sometimes came multiple times a day or even back to back, if time ran out. Angel,



We're able to talk about life...I can talk about finances. I can talk about what my day is actually like, in more depth, and not just a quick check-in. *Now we're talking more, we're building more,* and we're able to provide more emotional support to one another.

— ANGEL, WIFE OF AN INCARCERATED PERSON (CALIFORNIA)

whose husband is incarcerated in California, reflected, “We’re able to talk about life... I can talk about finances. I can talk about what my day is actually like, in more depth, and not just a quick check-in. Now we’re talking more, we’re building more, and we’re able to provide more emotional support to one another.”

People not only communicated more, but were able to be present with each other in real time. Lorraine, whose husband is incarcerated in New York, explained how he was able to listen live as his grandsons played football, noting that, for the first time in decades, “he’s actually a part of it.” Greg, who is incarcerated in Connecticut, described a similar feeling when he participated in his daughter’s surprise 30th birthday party over the phone, “When the time came and she was opening the door, they were saying ‘surprise!’ and I was saying ‘surprise!’”

Free communication has also allowed families to break through generational barriers, making it possible to connect with young children and the elderly, who otherwise tend to struggle to navigate correctional communication systems. Carlos, who was incarcerated in Minnesota, now “keep[s] a consistent level of communication going” with his mother, daughter, and grandchildren. As Michael, who was incarcerated in New York, explained, “Now they don’t have to set up an account. We just put their number on the list and we can call them.”

These strengthened relationships were not just relevant at the individual level, but at the institutional level. Incarcerated people and correctional staff have described radically transformed correctional environments in which people are now more connected, more engaged, and less isolated. Lacey felt a noticeable shift in the soundscape of the facility. During count time, she described how the sound of people talking with loved ones filled the space, “You hear one lady singing to her children. Another is [being] stern with her teenage son. You hear people laughing.”

Stronger family and community ties do not eliminate the challenges of incarceration, but they preserve the relationships that make hope, healing, rehabilitation, and reentry possible. Ultimately, these are the relationships that incarcerated people will rely on after release to help support their reentry. As Kim Watson, Assistant Deputy of Programs in a New York facility, noted, when people return home, sustained communication ensures they return to communities where they are understood, supported, and able to contribute, such that they can be “an asset” to the community.



It allows us the opportunity to keep a consistent level of communication going.

— CARLOS, FORMERLY INCARCERATED PERSON (MINNESOTA)

FINDING

4.

PARENTING *and Child Development*

Nearly half of people in prison are parents to minor children, with 18% of those children four years old or younger.⁸ For parents who are incarcerated, connecting with their children over the phone is one of the primary ways they continue to parent while separated. But the high cost of phone calls has long made that kind of connection difficult to sustain at the levels necessary for child rearing. Parents are often forced to consider whether to spend resources on staying involved in their children's lives or on other needs for their care and upbringing.

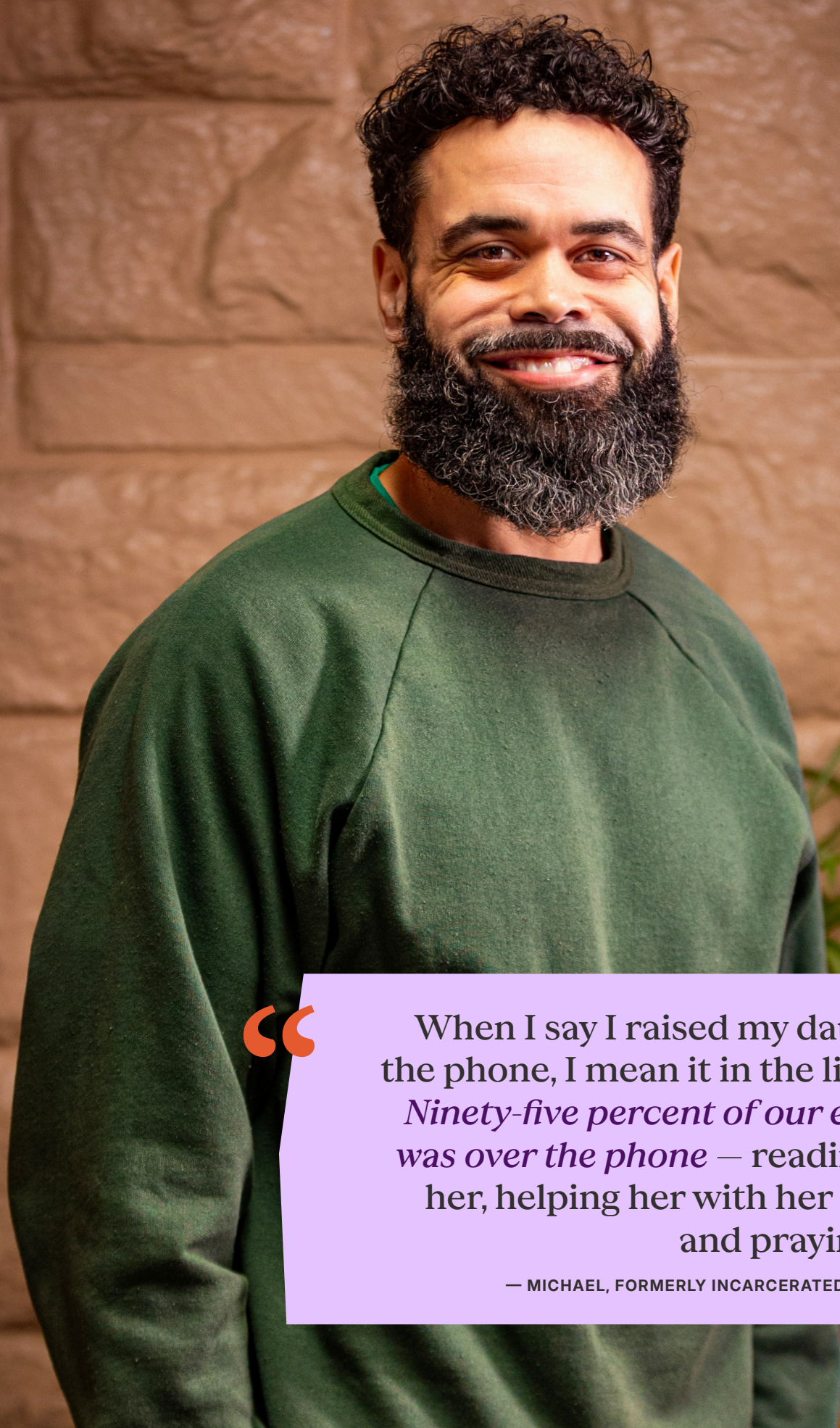
Participants described how the cost of calls disrupted parenting in both practical and emotional ways. Many incarcerated parents reported having to rely on others to cover the cost of calls or needing to limit conversations, and the emotional stress that came with both. Nia, whose husband, with whom she shares a son, is incarcerated in Massachusetts, explained that "there were moments where I didn't have the money, and I had to think about how that would affect my son... I didn't want him to feel like there was something wrong with his dad or that he couldn't talk to him." Moreover, the need to monitor time and expenses made it difficult to be emotionally present during calls, souring what would otherwise be opportunities for care and connec-

tion. Many of those interviewed reflected on the long-term harm caused by periods of disconnection, particularly during formative years.

Participants also recalled being unable to communicate during critical moments of crisis. In one particularly stark example, Omar, a formerly incarcerated father in Connecticut, described his inability to intervene during a critical moment in his child's life that had catastrophic consequences: "I [asked the] counselor, 'Could you make a call for me? My son's getting in trouble in school. I'm trying to appeal to his mind and let him know this is not the way.' She said, 'We don't let people call.' And two weeks later, I got a phone call that my son got killed because he was defending his little brother."

Strong familial bonds are widely recognized as foundational to child development. By removing financial barriers to connection, free communication policies allow incarcerated parents to be present again and families to preserve those bonds during incarceration. Free communication allows incarcerated parents and caregivers to participate in the daily routines that sustain parent-child relationships. Participants describe being able to wake children up, check in before school, help

⁸ Laura M. Maruschak, Jennifer Bronson, and Mariel Alper. *Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016 Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. March 2021. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmcspl16st.pdf>



When I say I raised my daughter over the phone, I mean it in the literal sense. *Ninety-five percent of our engagement was over the phone* — reading books to her, helping her with her homework, and praying with her.

— MICHAEL, FORMERLY INCARCERATED PERSON (NEW YORK)

with homework, and say good night — small, consistent interactions that build trust and emotional stability over time. This consistency allows parents to engage in the less visible but essential aspects of caregiving — offering guidance, acting as a sounding board, and helping children understand their family’s history, traditions, and values. Participants further describe children’s responses to this increased access — eagerly anticipating daily calls, running to the phone, and continuing conversations across multiple interactions.

For parents of younger children, these shifts were critical. Oscar, a father formerly incarcerated in the federal system, explained that his young daughter would forget their conversations if they could not speak over long stretches, but “when you are able to call every day, have a conversation with her, and then you call the next day, she remembers the conversation you had the day before.”

The impact is magnified for children with disabilities. Angel, whose husband is incarcerated in California, described how free communication helped his autistic daughter, who struggled with speech, develop: “They’re able to spend an hour on the phone each night. Sometimes a little bit longer to watch movies together over the phone. He reads to her, and she’ll read to him... Now, she’s talking so much more. She is being so vocal since she’s been able to speak to her dad.” Paul, an incarcerated father in New York, explained the importance of consistency for children with autism, “My son is autistic. Now that he’s 16, he wants to talk to me, and he looks forward to me calling. If I don’t call at the time he expects, his mother emails me asking what’s going on.”

For families with grade school children, free calls also enabled meaningful academic involvement. Parents

described encouraging academic engagement, helping with homework, supporting the college application process, and guiding children through complex social dynamics. Marc, a formerly incarcerated father in New York, explained, “I got to sit on the phone and do homework with my daughter... which was huge, just kind of sit there and allow her time to think through the problems and not worry about it costing per minute.” Participants noted that this support often translated into increased motivation among children and improved academic performance.

Participants also describe changes in children’s emotional wellbeing. Parents reported that regular, unhurried communication allowed children to open up more naturally. Natavia, an incarcerated mother in New York, explained, “You can’t force a child to say what’s going on in 30 minutes... [But] you can hear if your child is going through something by the tone of their voice. With free phone calls, I can call back and get my child to communicate with me. She’ll say, what time do the phones come on? I’ll say ‘seven,’ and she’ll say, ‘call me at seven.’ It helps a lot.”

These effects can have long-standing impacts on families. Research shows that parental incarceration can influence children’s future outcomes and involvement in the criminal legal and child-welfare systems.⁹ But stronger parent-child relationships can help to mitigate the harm of parental incarceration and improve outcomes for impacted children,¹⁰ and thus generations that come after. By enabling consistent parental engagement, reducing stress within families, and supporting child development, free communication policies help strengthen family stability and generational mobility.

⁹ Leah Wang. *Both sides of the bars: How mass incarceration punishes families*. Prison Policy Initiative. August 2022. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/08/11/parental_incarceration/

¹⁰ Leah Wang. *Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families*. Prison Policy Initiative. December 2021. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/

CASE STUDY:

California


YEAR: 2023

POLICY: Free phone calls across all state prisons and youth detention facilities

Highlights of Free Communication

- Average call time per person per day increased by 208%, from 14.3 to 43.9 minutes. To date, families have made 277.5 million more calls and used 3.0 billion more minutes.
- Families with incarcerated loved ones saved \$16.0 million per year, or \$172 per incarcerated person, with another \$345 in accrued value from new connections. To date, families have saved \$51.4 million.
- The cost per minute dropped by 51% compared to pre-policy rates, which were already among the lowest in the country. Of all the jurisdictions with free calling, California has the lowest effective per minute rate.





California became the second state in the country to make prison phone calls free when Senate Bill 1008, the Keep Families Connected Act, was signed into law in 2022. The law took effect on January 1, 2023, making phone calls free for people in state prisons and youth detention facilities, or nearly 90,000 incarcerated people. It also required the state’s utility commission to establish service quality standards.

To implement the new law, California initially renegotiated its telecommunications contract with ViaPath. However, ViaPath’s contract award had been previously challenged in court by Securus, which ultimately won its legal battle and secured the state contract. The vendor transition reduced the per minute cost of calls substantially, from \$0.025¹¹ to \$0.016, but created other issues that were, at times, conflated with the introduction of the free calling program. The contemporaneous rollout of individual calling-enabled tablets took much longer than expected and the deprioritization of wall phones led to service quality issues that rightfully triggered frustration across the system.

Even so, immediately after implementation, while calls were still primarily made over wall phones, average call time per person per day jumped from 14.3 minutes to 23.8 minutes, a 67% increase. The modest increase was lower than expected due to the vast inadequacy of communications infrastructure across the state’s prisons. In some units, hundreds of incarcerated people shared just a handful of phones. The introduction of tablets was undoubtedly necessary. And usage gradually increased to 43.9 minutes per person per day as tablets were rolled out.

In the end, the cost of providing free phone calls in California prisons — now roughly \$23.8 million per year — met legislative expectations of “low tens of millions”, with the state securing a 51% discount from the rates families were paying. If incarcerated people and their families had to pay for the call volume they are now using, they would be spending \$48.2 million each year.

¹¹ In its renegotiated contract with ViaPath, California secured a volume discount in which the state’s per minute cost decreased, from \$0.025 to \$0.019, as it hit specific call volume milestones. The state also received 30 minutes of free call time per person per month from ViaPath. The transition to Securus created substantial savings for the state.

FINDING

5.

IMPROVED MENTAL *and* *Physical Health*

Prisons and jails are isolating by design. Incarceration cuts people off from their families and communities, leaving many feeling abandoned, worthless, and hopeless. These emotions manifest in unproductive ways that can stunt the development of prosocial skills and rehabilitation, to the detriment of both personal growth and public safety.

Phone calls are a literal lifeline for incarcerated people. In a setting defined by separation, they can ease loneliness and depression, bring back the sense of belonging incarceration often strips away, and restore the hope needed to keep going. Participants noted access to these effects after free communication policies were implemented. As Robert, who was formerly incarcerated in Los Angeles, explained, "Without the free phone calls, all your connections are cut off. You are literally isolated from everything. You get a sense of hope when you can still interact with people on the outside and [see] there's people out there that care about you."

Family members described similar experiences of loneliness and emotional strain when they could not maintain regular contact. Without consistent communication, they were left to worry, fill in gaps, and navigate daily life without the presence of their loved one. Incarcerated parents faced particular challenges in trying to support children facing mental health crises from behind bars. When communication became free, that distance narrowed. Family members were able to stay present in one another's lives, share emotional support, and move through daily challenges together rather than apart.

Participants widely cited boosts in mental health and emotional wellbeing created by free communication policies. Seventy-six percent of incarcerated people, 77% of family members, and all correctional staff described

77%

of family members reported improvements in stress, emotional stability, or overall wellbeing

76%

of incarcerated people reported improvements in stress, emotional stability, or overall wellbeing



He doesn't like burdening people. He didn't like that he put himself in a situation where now people had to pay to talk to him, *but he needed the talking.*

— TRICIA, SISTER OF AN INCARCERATED PERSON (FEDERAL)

improvements in stress, emotional stability, or overall wellbeing in incarcerated people and their families once calls became free.

That shift was felt in everyday moments. Being able to reach someone directly, rather than waiting and wondering, allowed people to regulate their emotions and stay grounded. "Now, I'm able to relieve a little bit of stress or anxiety I might have," said Valentino, who is incarcerated in California. "[Instead of] just assuming everything's alright or guessing if everything's alright, I can actually call and help them [through] whatever they're going through, and they can help me with whatever I'm going through... If I'm happy, if I'm going through any kind of frustrations, or feeling like I'm overwhelmed, I can just pick up the phone and call them."

That presence was especially important during the most difficult moments. Several incarcerated people described staying connected during illness, death, and grief. John, who is incarcerated in New York, spoke about calling his dying mother multiple times a day in her final days, explaining that hearing his voice brought her comfort even though he could not be physically present. Yannick, who was formerly incarcerated in California, described how free communication allowed her to grieve alongside loved ones, "My best friend had passed away, but I was able to be a part of that grieving process with [the family]. We were able to cry together, and I was able to put something in his eulogy and in his book, which allowed me to have closure."

For many, this connection restored a broader sense of purpose and hope. Regular communication kept peo-

ple anchored in their relationships and future plans, reinforcing that they were still part of something beyond incarceration. Elizabeth, who was formerly incarcerated in California, explained, "These free phone calls keep us soft, keep us focused on freedom, and not what's happening around us." Tricia, whose brother was formerly incarcerated in New York, reflected that regular communication helped her brother feel remembered and valued, noting that "he didn't feel like he was forgotten."

In addition to creating pathways to emotional support, free communications policies also eliminated a major stressor for incarcerated people and their families: the financial burden of calls. The constant need to monitor cost or ask for money created ongoing shame and stress. Tricia described that tension: "He doesn't like burdening people. He didn't like that he put himself in a situation where now people had to pay to talk to him, but he needed the talking." With this emotional barb removed, incarcerated people and their families have more emotional capacity to manage the difficult realities of incarceration.

Inside facilities, improvements in individual mental health have had broader environmental impacts. Abiona, who was formerly incarcerated in Massachusetts, described how "it upped the morale and increased the mental stability [across the facility]." Kim Watson, Assistant Deputy of Programs in a New York prison, shared a similar perspective: "It has helped [incarcerated people] tremendously to just be calm, to be able to speak to their families."



As a counselor, I give them as much support as I possibly can, but I'm not their family. I'm not their friend. They still have a guard up against me. *Being able to talk to their family, they're able to get guidance from them* that they wouldn't really want to take from me. Most of the time, they'll listen to them.



— FELIX, PRISON COUNSELOR (NEW YORK)

Even within formal support systems, the difference was clear. As Felix Ali, a counselor working in a New York prison, explained, “As a counselor, I give them as much support as I possibly can, but I’m not their family. I’m not their friend. They still have a guard up against me. Being able to talk to their family, they’re able to get guidance from them that they wouldn’t really want to take from me. Most of the time, they’ll listen to them.”

While many participants focused on the obvious mental health effects of free communication policies, some also noted that these policies have allowed incarcerated people to get urgent medical attention. Unable to call 911 or access emergency medical help, incarcerated people must rely on correctional officers to receive medical attention. When such efforts proved unsuccessful, incarcerated people reported communicating urgent health needs to loved ones who could advocate for them by calling the facility and escalating their medical concerns.

Free communication allows incarcerated people to stay connected to those who know them, support them, and remind them of who they are beyond incarceration — those who care about them and their wellbeing. And it also allows for reciprocation so that support can flow both ways. In doing so, it helps improve the health and wellbeing of incarcerated people and their families broadly, especially in stabilizing individual and collective mental health and emotional wellbeing in an environment where isolation is the norm.



Without the free phone calls, all your connections are cut off. You are literally isolated from everything. *You get a sense of hope when you can still interact with people on the outside* and [see] there’s people out there that care about you.

— ROBERT, FORMERLY INCARCERATED PERSON (LOS ANGELES)

FINDING

6.

LESS VIOLENCE *and Operational Disruption*

Phones have long been one of the most volatile pressure points inside correctional facilities. It is at the phones where it all happens — where incarcerated people get good news and bad news that can change their day or their life. As Steve, who was formerly incarcerated in Connecticut, reflected on his experience over the years: “Going back to the early ‘90s, phones have been the central place for violence in prisons. I cannot emphasize that enough. The central place where people are hearing the greatest news of their life and the very worst news of their life.”

Participants consistently describe how the structure of paid communication systems intensified that pressure. Artificial scarcity created by high call costs, limited infrastructure, and restrictive access meant that phones were a consistent source of tension. Participants described long lines, time limits, bullying over phone access, and the financial pressure of paid calls as frequent triggers for disputes. Ultimately, emotionally charged conversations were often cut short, leaving people to carry unresolved stress back into shared living spaces, which expectedly created broader environmental tensions.

Free communication policies and access to personal tablets largely removed the scarcity that had driven conflict. When communication became readily accessible, incarcerated people no longer had to compete for limited phone time or worry about when they would next be able to speak with loved ones. Participants described a noticeable reduction in anxiety tied to phone access, as well as far fewer disputes over time and availability, if any. Steve shared that the violence around the phones “evaporated” when communication became free. Combined with regular communication with loved ones and the elimination of a major financial stressor — both of which

100%

of correctional staff
recommend other agencies
adopt free communication
policies



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

— CORRECTIONAL OFFICER WALLS (NEW YORK)

boosted morale — these changes substantially eased tensions and interpersonal dynamics broadly.

Incarcerated people and correctional staff consistently described free communication as a security tool that improved the day-to-day climate inside correctional facilities. Every correctional staff participant described the policy as reducing tension and making officers' jobs "easier", and 79% of incarcerated people mentioned positive changes in the prison environment once phone calls became free. Even among family members who were not directly exposed to prison dynamics, 23% reported hearing from loved ones that free calls had a calming effect inside facilities.

The free phone calls have reduced the stressors greatly... It's brought a calming effect to the [incarcerated] population...

Any way that we could make the job less stressful for our staff is a priority for us.

— DEPUTY WARDEN OLES (CONNECTICUT)

Participants repeatedly described the correctional environments as "calmer" after the implementation of free communication policies, more specifically, they experienced less tension, fewer conflicts, and a more emotionally stable environment overall. Incarcerated people described feeling less on edge and frustrated,

and staff observed fewer disruptions in daily operations. Justin Oles, Deputy Warden at a Connecticut prison, reflected, "The free phone calls have reduced the stressors greatly... It's brought a calming effect to the [incarcerated] population... Any way that we could make the job less stressful for our staff is a priority for us." Lacey, who is incarcerated in New York, explained, "People seem a lot calmer. They seem more connected to the people on the outside. I feel like they're a little more grounded in here. They have an outlet now."

Incarcerated people also emphasized that regular contact with loved ones helped them manage stress and conflict while incarcerated, which correctional staff also recognized. Many described being able to talk through frustrations, process difficult news, or receive encouragement from family members in moments when emotions might otherwise escalate. John, who was formerly incarcerated in the federal system, explained, "A lot of people walk around there sad, mad, angry, frustrated... and that frustration spews out on [correctional officers]... Now, when the free calls came it was just a shift of energy. The saddest person in there was smiling... So, the COs definitely got a different type of energy."

With fewer conflicts and increased support from loved ones in navigating emotionally charged situations, participants reported a noticeable decrease in disciplinary infractions. These infractions often carry serious consequences that can affect a person's eligibility for early release, including parole. Thus, this shift not only improved daily life within facilities but also potentially enabled some incarcerated people to go home sooner.

Moreover, correctional staff participants often viewed free communication policies as rehabilitative programs that provided a constructive outlet for time and attention. Rather than congregating in common areas, incarcerated people actively chose to spend time connecting with loved ones. Corrections staff described this shift as improving operations and safety. Charles Mitchell, a sergeant in a New York prison, emphasized

the connection between engagement and safety: “I’m always security minded. If you keep incarcerated people busy, whether it be with the free phone calls or anything else positive and constructive, it is less likely they get involved with negative or violent behavior.”

Notably, in the jurisdictions that have implemented free communication policies, all incarcerated people have access regardless of security level or disciplinary record. Danielle Walls, a correctional officer at a New York prison, explained the importance of such an approach: “Depending on whether someone gets in trouble or not, some programs may not be accessible to them, but the phone calls are accessible even if your disciplinary isn’t [in] tip-top shape. That shouldn’t necessarily exclude you from being able to talk to your children.” In fact, several participants noted that calls with family often motivated better behavior.

Research aligns with these accounts, showing that expanded communication can contribute to calmer facility environments and more stable day-to-day operations. Findings from research reviews indicate that increased communication reduces disciplinary incidents and improves safety for both incarcerated people and correc-

tional staff. More specifically, studies have shown that regular communication can reduce rule infractions by 27% and incidents of violence by roughly 20%.¹²

These experiences led all correctional staff participants to recommend that other agencies adopt free communication policies with personal tablets. Sergeant Mitchell from New York said, “I would go for it. It’s going to be an enhancement for the incarcerated population and an enhancement for the security and civilian staff. It’s a win-win on both sides.” Yannick, who was formerly incarcerated in California, agreed, “If you can keep the level of violence down in the institution by a free phone call, use it.”

By eliminating scarcity, supporting emotional regulation, and providing a constructive way for people to spend time, free calls contribute to reducing one of the most persistent sources of tension, conflict, and violence inside correctional facilities for both staff and incarcerated people. There were now fewer disciplinary infractions, facilities had faced less disruption, and everyone was generally safer.



I would go for it. It’s going to be an enhancement for the incarcerated population and an enhancement for the security and civilian staff.
It’s a win-win on both sides.

— SERGEANT MITCHELL (NEW YORK)

¹² Chuck Meire. *RESEARCH ROUND-UP: Officer Safety Benefits of Free Communications*. February 2023. <https://connectfamiliesnow.com/s/2023-Officer-Safety-Research.pdf>

CASE STUDY:

New York

YEAR: 2025

POLICY: Free phone calls across all state prisons

Highlights of Free Communication

- Average call time per person per day increased by 38%, from 63.9 to 87.9 minutes. To date, families have made nine million more calls and used 173 million more minutes.
- Families with incarcerated loved ones saved \$26.2 million per year, or \$805 per incarcerated person, with another \$324 in accrued value from new connections. To date, families have saved \$16.2 million.
- The cost per minute dropped by 45% compared to pre-policy rates, which were already among the lowest in the country.





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

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

Building on landmark legislation in New York City that made the first correctional calls in the country free for incarcerated people and their families years earlier, New York made phone calls from all state prisons free on August 1, 2025. The state took a distinct approach by introducing free prison calls through administrative action, without legislation, becoming the first state in the country to do so. The decision was the result of years of discussions and negotiations between the state executive and legislature, with cooperation from the state's department of corrections.

To implement the policy, New York renegotiated its contract with Securus, reducing per minute rates from \$0.028 to \$0.015. The state pays an additional annual fee for an enhanced level of live monitoring that few agencies require, a cost it was able to roughly halve in its most recent negotiations.

Notably, New York has the highest usage of all jurisdictions with free communication policies, a long standing trend in the state explained only by the regional culture. Historically, incarcerated New Yorkers spent 26.0 minutes per day on calls. When the state rolled out individual calling-enabled tablets, in the year before introducing free communication, usage jumped to 63.9 minutes. Once the free communication policy was implemented, usage increased to an unprecedented 87.9 minutes per person per day, a figure that had yet to level out at the time of drafting given the newness of the policy.

Despite these usage levels, New York is spending roughly what it budgeted to provide free communications to incarcerated people and families, or about \$20.3 million annually. If New York were to bring its surveillance practices in line with those of other states, it could reduce that figure to \$15.7 million.

FINDING

7.

REHABILITATION

I see different individuals [when] they connect with their sons or their daughters or their wife. *They're exercising more, getting involved in groups, going to church. Why? Because they want to become better men.* I can see their attitudes — their moves — have changed. And I can see life, I can see the energy, I can see excitement. I can see the desire to do something different.

— SAUL, INCARCERATED PERSON (CALIFORNIA)

For many incarcerated people, staying connected to loved ones is not just about maintaining relationships — it is a catalyst for the internal motivation behind personal growth. That internal motivation is difficult to build when disconnected from the hope loved ones help create. Like everyone, incarcerated people feed off the love, energy, and faith that their relationships foster, making connection critical to rehabilitation. But for too long, the high cost of communication has frustrated individual rehabilitative efforts by separating incarcerated people from one of the most significant motivating forces: their families.

Participants consistently describe how communication with loved ones reinforces a sense of identity and responsibility for their lives beyond incarceration. Staying in touch allows people to remain connected to who they are as parents, partners, and members of their communities, rather than becoming defined solely by their time inside. This sense of identity and responsibility is motivating — when people feel connected to those who care about them and can see fruitful lives post incarceration, they are more likely to invest in their own growth and wellbeing. These pursuits can, in fact, bring people home sooner by encouraging them to en-

gage in programs that earn early release credit, where it is available.

Jasmeel, who is incarcerated in California, described how that connection shapes his behavior: “Conversations create a pathway for empathy, healing, a healthy relationship with my family, and actually, just hope for a future when I get out... Without these phone calls, that would not have been possible... They were vital for my healing, for my sobriety, for my growth, and for my ability to do the positive things I’m doing now in prison — because I have a belief that there are people out there who care for me, who love me, and who I am responsible for. So my behavior in prison reflects my love and care and responsibility to the people who are willing to spend their time and speak.”

Formerly incarcerated advocates and correctional staff echoed this dynamic, noting that regular communication with loved ones strengthens existing rehabilitation efforts by helping incarcerated people stay grounded in relationships that encourage self-improvement, accountability, and stability. When communication is limited or costly, those connections are harder to maintain. When access is consistent, they become an ongoing source of motivation.

Participants also describe how communication allows them to remain engaged in communities and support systems outside prison in ways that also reinforce rehabilitation. This includes maintaining connections to faith communities, cultural networks, and other forms of positive engagement that strengthen a sense of belonging and responsibility. In some cases, this connection extends to civic and community participation. As James Jeter, Co-founder and Director of Full Citizen’s Coalition, explained, “Because of free prison phone calls and the email system, we’ve been able to do in-prison organizing in a way that our state has never experienced.”

In helping incarcerated people maintain identity, connection, and a sense of responsibility to others, free

communication supports rehabilitation not by replacing formal programs, but by strengthening the social foundations that make those programs effective. Framed this way, these connections are not separate from rehabilitation, but part of it, perhaps even the root of it. Maintaining community ties, contributing to shared efforts, and staying engaged in collective life reinforce the habits, relationships, and sense of purpose that support long-term change.

As Candace, who is incarcerated in New York, reflected, “To the people who are paying for these phone calls now, I’d say I’m humbly grateful. This has been a blessing to us. You have changed our lives significantly. You’re actually investing in us and believing in the rehabilitative process.”

“My behavior in prison [now] reflects my love and care and responsibility *to the people who are willing to spend their time and speak.*”

— JASMEEL, INCARCERATED PERSON (CALIFORNIA)

FINDING

8.

REENTRY PLANNING *and Success*

Reentry can be daunting, and understandably so since the free world does not make reentry easy. Moreover, overburdened case managers and release planners often face large caseloads that limit the support they can provide. Ultimately, many incarcerated people are released without housing, employment, or the community support they need to help them navigate freedom. Formerly incarcerated people are almost ten times more likely to be homeless¹³ than the general public and have an unemployment rate of over 27%.¹⁴ And all this leads to high recidivism rates that undermine public safety.

However, research has repeatedly shown that having strong and consistent community ties is among the most important factors in reentry success. These ties increase the likelihood of securing housing, landing employment, and finding stability. In fact, one survey found that 42% of incarcerated people spend their first free night at the home of a family member or friend, and another found that, of the incarcerated people who had employment upon release, 54% talked to friends and 45% talked to family to secure their jobs.¹⁵ It is the

same connections that motivate rehabilitation that also make reentry possible — they become the foundation on which successful return is built.



It was because of free phone calls that I was able to call the organization that ended up connecting me with the university. *Within a month* I'm being hired in this amazing job!

— ELIZABETH, FORMERLY INCARCERATED PERSON (CALIFORNIA)

¹³ Lucius Couloute. *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people*. Prison Policy Initiative. August 2018. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>

¹⁴ Partners for Justice. *Community and Social Ties Create Safety*. May 2023. [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6082d94f16ba7348d54d034d/654022ff282b13e017d372e8_Community%20and%20Social%20Ties%20in%20the%20Criminal%20Legal%20System%20\(Updated\).pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6082d94f16ba7348d54d034d/654022ff282b13e017d372e8_Community%20and%20Social%20Ties%20in%20the%20Criminal%20Legal%20System%20(Updated).pdf)

¹⁵ Ibid

Free communication allows incarcerated people to begin the complex administrative process of planning for life after release while still incarcerated. Participants spoke in depth about the work required to successfully reintegrate, from finding housing and employment to enrolling in educational programs, continuing mental health or addiction treatment, and arranging transportation. Free communication enables incarcerated people to coordinate with loved ones, complete required documentation, and manage the many details associated with new jobs, school enrollment, or transitional housing. With consistent communication, participants described being able to develop and act on reentry plans prior to parole or discharge, rather than scrambling to access resources in the critical and often chaotic days immediately following release. Elizabeth, who was incarcerated in California, explained, “It was because of free phone calls that I was able to call the organization that ended up connecting me with the university. Within a month I’m being hired in this amazing job!”

Access to free communication also enables people to advocate for themselves — contacting housing providers, employment resources, and support programs directly before release. This is particularly important when someone is required to enroll in specific services after release, like substance abuse treatment or other programs that are a condition of release but often have backlogs. Several participants, who did not have these requirements, nevertheless also described using free communication to maintain recovery from substance addictions, including contacting sober living facilities, connecting with recovery programs, and maintaining accountability through connections to outside support networks.

Tim, a formerly incarcerated advocate in Minnesota, emphasized the importance of this agency. “This really allows people to start to advocate and be extensively involved in their own reentry and release planning. It gives you an opportunity to advocate for yourself without being a burden.” Donald, who was formerly incar-

cerated in California, captured this clearly: “I was able to call social services, call transitional housing, call the school, call a program. I got out in December, and in January, I was in school. All of that was possible because we didn’t have to pay for the phone.”

Some describe rebuilding trust, making amends, and restoring communication patterns that had deteriorated. As Jasmeel, who is incarcerated in California, explained, “[Before, I wondered], what do I do when I get out? I don’t have anyone. But building the connections I have built with my family and with my friends through these phone calls, now I know that I have a huge support network out there that is waiting for me and willing to help me and guide me along and support me.”

For some, the road to reentry starts with advocating for their own release, where again free communication provides major support. With free communication, incarcerated people can participate in their own defense, prepare for parole hearings, and create required release plans — all of which get people home sooner. Participants describe using free communication to contact investigators or attorneys, gather documentation, and coordinate letters of support. They also emphasize that communicating seamlessly with family during critical windows can make a significant difference in outcomes. Yannick, who was formerly incarcerated in California, stressed the need for additional support during these times, “Preparing for [the parole] board was one of the most stressful things I have ever done. I needed those calls, to call my dad or my grandmother or one of my close friends, for them to snap me back into reality.”

Successful reentry is not just a personal outcome — it is a public one. When people return home with stable housing, employment, treatment continuity, and strong support networks, communities are safer and public systems are less burdened. Free communication is not simply a benefit to incarcerated people and their families; it is an investment in our communities as they come home.



Recommendations

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

— DEPUTY WARDEN OLES (CONNECTICUT)

The findings in this report are not abstract. They represent billions of minutes of restored connection and hundreds of millions of dollars returned to families that are creating stronger relationships, safer facilities, and people better prepared to come home and stay home. They represent children who got to do homework with their parents, families who grieved together across prison walls, and people who walked out of prison with a support network already in place.

They also represent what is possible everywhere — and what is actively being withheld where these policies have not yet been adopted.

The jurisdictions studied in this report demonstrate that making communication free is achievable, affordable, and transformative. But the evidence also makes clear that outcomes vary significantly based on how these policies are designed and implemented. The dif-

ference between a free communication policy that delivers on its promise and one that falls short is a matter of intention.

The recommendations that follow are drawn directly from the lessons from these jurisdictions. They are organized around four priorities: guaranteeing meaningful access, protecting the integrity of free communication policies against industry circumvention, reforming the procurement and contract structures that determine what governments actually pay, and building communication systems that are structurally resistant to the incentives that have driven exploitation for decades.

POLICY

The experiences of the jurisdictions examined in this report highlight several key policy choices that can help ensure free communication policies are effective, sustainable, and equitable.

- **Guarantee free communication in all forms and prevent the undermining of that intent.**
 - Establish a right to voice communication services for people in prisons, jails, and youth facilities.
 - Require that all available communication services, including voice calls, video calls, and electronic messaging, be provided free of charge to both the initiating and receiving parties.
 - Provide every incarcerated person with an individual calling-enabled tablet that allows them to connect from their cells, but maintain wall phones as backup.
 - Prohibit restrictive caps on communication beyond access limitations stemming from standard facility operations, like calling hours.
 - Prohibit agencies from collecting commissions, revenue-sharing payments, or any other financial benefit tied to any services bundled with communication services.
 - Prohibit contracts or policies that limit or replace visits with communications technology.

- **Safeguard civil rights and protect against the harms of broad surveillance.**
 - Ensure accessibility accommodations for people with disabilities and equitable access for all people.
 - Protect confidential and privileged communications, including attorney-client correspondence and survivor communications protected under PREA.
 - Prohibit the communications vendor from using or selling user data, including to train AI.

- **Strengthen oversight and accountability so the public can monitor and ensure faithful implementation.**
 - Require public transparency of all correctional communication contracts, including pricing structures, service standards, and financial arrangements.
 - Mandate regular public reporting on communication services, including access, cost to agency, and usage metrics.

PROCUREMENT

The experiences of the jurisdictions examined in this report also highlight several procurement best practices that can help ensure agencies have control, flexibility, and cost-efficiency in implementing free communications policies.

- **Require pricing that better reflects the modern telecommunications market.**
 - Consider abandoning per-minute models for fixed-fee or per-person models that create predictable, transparent costs.
 - Regardless of payment model, ensure the effective cost per minute is below \$0.02. Costs may be slightly higher for agencies with an average daily population of less than 1,000.
 - Eliminate all commission or reimbursement terms on any products or services paid for by incarcerated people or their families.

- **Create procurement processes that encourage vendor competition.**
 - Avoid exclusive, single-vendor arrangements and bundled contracts by procuring discrete services separately.
 - Avoid long-term contracts that create vendor lock-in. Limit contract duration to five years and prohibit automatic renewals without competitive rebidding.
 - Require interoperable, non-proprietary technology that makes switching providers easier.

- **Explore other operating models that limit the role or avoid traditional correctional telecommunications vendors.**
 - Use managed service models in which agencies maintain control over broadband and hardware while contracting specific vendors for discrete services (e.g., software platforms, call management, or security features).
 - Explore government-owned or government-operated enterprise models where agencies retain ownership of infrastructure and platform, and contract only for technical support, if necessary.
 - Consider non-profit or public-benefit operators whose mission prioritizes service provision over profit.

IMPLEMENTATION

Finally, the experiences of the jurisdictions examined in this report revealed important implementation steps that can help ensure free communication policies are rolled out successfully.

- **Rebid or renegotiate the communication services contract.**
 - Use the expected increase in call volume to negotiate down the cost of communication services.
- **Maximize communications infrastructure to absorb increases in call volume.**
 - Ensure facilities are properly outfitted with broadband to ensure service quality and continuity for tablets.
 - Provide all incarcerated people with individual calling-enabled tablets, and the necessary accessories (e.g., chargers, headphones, etc.).
 - Ensure that wall phones are still maintained in the case of tablet or service malfunctions or for those who may need time to learn how to use a tablet.
- **Communicate the change to incarcerated people and their families in advance.**
 - Give incarcerated people and their families two to four weeks' notice of the policy, at minimum, to allow people to prepare.
 - Post notices across facilities and online in the most common languages.
 - Provide incarcerated people and their families with a refund mechanism for funds on their accounts that remain after the switch to free communication.
- **Track changes in communication usage and adjust institutional policies as necessary.**
 - Report changes in communication usage (e.g., call volume).
 - Revisit policies that restrict communication access to maximize accessibility.

Ultimately, the success of free communication policies demonstrates something larger: exploitation is not a necessary feature of correctional communications. Policies and their implementation can be designed to prioritize connection over profit, transparency over secrecy, and public accountability over private extraction. As jurisdictions across the country consider their next steps, the path forward is not simply to make calls free — it is to build communication infrastructures that are financially sustainable, technologically adaptable, and structurally resistant to the incentives that have fueled harm for decades.



Now that phone calls are free, *every one of my relationships with everybody I talk to is better.*

— MIKE, INCARCERATED PERSON (NEW YORK)



Conclusion

For decades, prison and jail communication functioned as a powerful tool of economic extraction, constraining the basic human right to connection between loved ones. Families already destabilized by incarceration were required to pay exorbitant rates simply to maintain basic relationships with their loved ones inside. The result was financial strain, broken relationships, emotional stress and anger, facilities filled with tension and conflict, and weakened support for people navigating incarceration and reentry.

The data in this report demonstrates that none of this is necessary nor productive. On the contrary, it artificially constricts communication and weakens the relationships that matter most to people, undermining families, communities, the correctional system, and public safety. And the trailblazing jurisdictions studied reveal that this harm is also not inevitable — it is the result of policy and procurement decisions that we can change with this insight.

Across the board, making prison and jail communication free dramatically expanded connection between incarcerated people and their families to the benefit of all. Incarcerated people rekindled relationships and strengthened existing connections with their loved ones, engaging in powerful exchanges of presence and support. Children suddenly had their parents back in their lives, checking in before and after school, helping with homework, and providing guidance during life's toughest moments. And through it all, incarcerated people regained a sense of identity and responsibility that motivated personal growth and accountability.

The positive impacts of these renewed connections spread across facilities and beyond their walls. Consistent access to free communication lifted the weight of isolation and financial stress — and the tensions, conflicts, and violence that come with it. Incarcerated people began to look to their free future and plan for it, securing housing, employment, and treatment services in preparation for release. Meanwhile, their families experienced financial relief at levels that can spur generational economic mobility.

Just as importantly, these policies proved financially feasible. By renegotiating contracts and even restructuring how correctional communication services are paid for, governments have demonstrated that making correctional communication free to incarcerated people and their families does not require unsustainable public expenditures. In most cases, governments secured significantly lower service costs, which will return multiples through their expected impact on public safety.

The evidence is clear: when the cost barrier to communication is removed, families are strengthened, incarcerated people recommit to rehabilitation, correctional systems function more effectively, and people return to society sooner and better prepared for success. Free communication policies transform a system once built on exploitation into one that centers humanity to promote public safety.

Communication is not a luxury. It is a necessary, achievable, and transformative lifeline.

RELATED RESOURCES

Fact Sheet: Two-pager covering the eight areas of measurable impact.

Implementation Guide: A practical guide for agencies, legislators, and advocates designing, procuring, and rolling out free communication in prisons and jails.

Ultimate Campaign Guide: A guide for advocates and policymakers working to pass free communications policies in their community.

Full report and resources available at:

<http://ConnectFamiliesNow.com/PowerofFree>



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