



DATE: March 22, 2021

TO: Judiciary Committee

FROM: Julia Wilcox, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy, The Alliance

RE: SB 972: An act concerning the cost of telecommunications services in correctional facilities.

Good Morning Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Fishbein, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Julia Wilcox, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy at the CT Community Nonprofit Alliance (The Alliance). The Alliance is the statewide association of community nonprofits. Community nonprofits provide essential services to over half a million individuals and families in Connecticut every year, and employ 14% of Connecticut's workforce, improving the quality of life in communities across the State.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 972: An act concerning the cost of telecommunications services in correctional facilities. The Alliance supports the proposal to provide cost-free telecommunications for incarcerated persons. The opportunity for an individual who is incarcerated to maintain and improve relationships with members of their families and community, is a key component to successfully reentering their communities upon release. The current system, which includes exorbitant fees for this communication, is counter-productive and punitive. The high cost of prison phone calls is an unfair and unnecessary barrier that prevents incarcerated people not only from connecting with their loved ones, but also from accessing legal services and other critical supports.

According to a study published by Worth Rises¹, Connecticut ranks last in the nation with regard to affordability of phone calls for incarcerated individuals. The same study noted that prisoners' families spend over \$12 million per year to communicate with incarcerated loved ones. This is due to a counter-productive profit-sharing agreement between the State of Connecticut and Securus - a private telecom provider. Even prior to the pandemic, nearly one in three families of incarcerated individuals went into debt trying to stay connected, and women carried 87 percent of the burden.

We commend the Committee for introducing this important bill. One in three Americans has some type of criminal record, which can create lifelong barriers to opportunity for them and their families. To better achieve equity, especially across race and income, barriers to successful reentry, including employment, education, and housing, must be removed.

Most criminal justice research focuses on the effectiveness of programs that seek to reduce recidivism by changing offender attitudes and behavior. Reductions in recidivism translate to breaking the cycle of crime and poverty. The proposed legislation continues the efforts of the legislature to build on past success, maintain momentum of the Second Chance Society Initiative, and provide the tools necessary to ensure that these returning citizens are actively engaged and invested in their reentry process, their families and their communities.

In addition to the proposed legislation, we urge your continued support of reentry services within the community which are essential to the ongoing success of the previous Second Chance Society Initiative.

Community nonprofits in Connecticut work to reintegrate former offenders into their communities. Community Justice providers support justice-involved individuals and their families, as well as survivors of crime. These programs, funded by the Department of Correction and the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch, continue to play an essential role in the ongoing success related to criminal justice reform in Connecticut. According to the January 2021 OPM Monthly Indicators Reportⁱⁱ, community providers are serving approximately 4,000 people in programs which are funded by Department of Corrections – a greater than 30% increase from 2014. Thousands more receive services through providers that contract with the Court Support Services Division of Judicial Branch.

Once again, The Alliance urges the committee to support SB 972. The ability of the state to ensure continuation of the criminal justice reforms that have positioned Connecticut as a national leader, is greatly dependent on a sustainable system of services, as provided by the nonprofit sector.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues.

Julia Z. Wilcox, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy

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

ⁱⁱ January 2021 OPM Monthly Indicators Report: https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/OPM/CJPPD/CjResearch/MonthlyIndicators/2021-MONTHLY-INDICATOR-REPORTS/MonthlyIndicatorsReport_Jan_-2021.pdf