



Testimony in Opposition to HF 2812 as a part of HF 2432 to Remove Free Communication to People Incarcerated in Minnesota Prisons and Their Families

April 3, 2025

Dear Public Safety Finance and Policy Committee,

My name is Celina Chapin, Chief Advocacy Officer at Worth Rises, and I am writing to urge the committee to ensure **HF 2812**, a bill that seeks to reverse Minnesota's 2023 decision to provide free prison phone calls to incarcerated people and their families, does not pass as part of in **HF 2432** or in any other form.

Worth Rises is a national nonprofit dedicated to ending the exploitation of people impacted by incarceration. We have worked across the country to help states and counties pass and implement free communication policies for incarcerated people and their loved ones, including in Connecticut, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and here in Minnesota. We have also worked closely with the FCC to track the impact of federal reforms. Through this work, we have spent countless hours inside prisons and jails — before, during, and after implementation — speaking with incarcerated people and correctional staff, and outside of prisons working with families, researchers, and other stakeholders. We have seen firsthand the tangible benefits of this policy both inside facilities and in communities, and we hope that Minnesota continues to lead with smart, humane practices that strengthen families and improve public safety.

There were a couple of concerns voiced during a hearing before this committee on Wednesday, April 2nd that we would like to address, to underscore the importance of free communication in Minnesota's carceral system and affirm your decision to uphold it. We also want to highlight practical ways to mitigate these concerns through thoughtful implementation of this policy. Specifically, we address:

1. The cost-benefit analysis of free prison phone calls for taxpayers
2. The implications for safety and security of both incarcerated individuals and staff

The Cost- Benefit Analysis of Free Prison Phone Calls to Taxpayers

In last week's hearing, committee members acknowledged the positive impacts of the free communication policy but raised concerns about its cost to taxpayers and whether that responsibility should instead fall on incarcerated people and their families, who we note are also taxpayers. These concerns overlook both the financial reality and the broader stated purpose of our correctional system.

Minnesota taxpayers spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year on the prison system, in part to support rehabilitation, improve reentry outcomes, and increase public safety. It is fiscally responsible for the state to prioritize rehabilitation and public safety to curb the steep human and financial costs of high recidivism rates. Prior to this policy, families were forced to pay \$4.5 million per year just to stay in touch with their incarcerated loved ones. The state's decision to eliminate that burden helps break cycles of poverty and incarceration, while also reducing future costs associated with recidivism.

The benefits of this investment are well-documented. Maintaining family ties is one of the most effective tools available for reducing recidivism and supporting reentry. A study by the Minnesota Department of Corrections found that incarcerated people who received visits were 13% less likely to commit new crimes and 25% less likely to violate parole upon release.¹ Phone communication offers similar benefits by reinforcing accountability, connection, and the motivation to return home and succeed.²

Further, most incarcerated individuals in Minnesota are parents housed more than 100 miles from home.³ For their children, phone calls are often the only consistent means of connection. Research has shown that maintaining this contact can help children cope with trauma, maintain emotional stability, and perform better academically.⁴ One study found that children who regularly speak with their incarcerated parents exhibit fewer behavioral concerns, stronger emotional well-being, and are less likely to drop out of school.⁵ Another found that supporting parent-child relationships during incarceration lowers the risk of children following the same path and becoming justice-involved in the future.⁶

Expecting incarcerated people to shoulder the cost of phone calls is simply not realistic. Prison wages are measured in cents per hour, and most incarcerated individuals have little to no income. That cost inevitably falls on families — many of whom are already living in poverty. One in three families with an incarcerated loved one goes into debt trying to stay connected, while prison telecom corporations continue to profit. Without this policy, one subset of taxpayers, the one that can least afford it, is essentially being double taxed through the cost of communication to further fund prisons and jails.

That said, there are also ways to make this investment even more cost-efficient. Commissioner Schnell explained in his testimony that the passage of new regulations by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) capping prison call rates at \$0.06 per minute,⁷ have led to a decrease in the cost of prison phone services in Minnesota. This suggests that Minnesota may

¹ Duwe, G., & Clark, V. (2013). Blessed Be the Social Tie That Binds: The Effects of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 24(3), 271–296.

² Loonstyn, N., & Galley, A. (2023, August 30). *Low-cost phone calls benefit incarcerated people, their families, and criminal legal institutions*. Urban Institute.

³ Sawyer, W., & Bertram, W. (2018). "Separation by Bars and Miles." Prison Policy Initiative.

⁴ Arditti, J. A. (2012). *Parental incarceration and the family: Psychological and social effects of imprisonment on children, parents, and caregivers*. NYU Press.

⁵ Causey, J. (2023, August 21). *The Health Divide: Free phone calls for the incarcerated improve their mental health. So why are costs exorbitant?* USC Center for Health Journalism.

See also: Wong, Leah. "Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families." Prison Policy Initiative, 2021.

⁶ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2021). *A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities*.

⁷ Federal Communications Commission. *Incarcerated People's Communications Services (IPCS)*. FCC, 2024.

have been overpaying before these regulations went into effect — and may still be. Other jurisdictions pay significantly less than the FCC cap: Illinois pays \$0.009 per minute; New Hampshire, \$0.012; Dallas, \$0.012; Colorado, \$0.014; California, \$0.016; Ohio and Mississippi, \$0.020; and Rhode Island, \$0.029. If Minnesota is paying more, it can and should renegotiate those contracts to secure a fairer deal.

The Implications for Safety and Security of Both Incarcerated Individuals and Staff

Concerns about safety inside of prisons also came up during the hearing. But research shows that maintaining family communication enhances safety, contrary to the talking points used by the proponents of HF 2812. Incarcerated individuals who maintain contact with their loved ones exhibit more positive behavior, greater emotional stability, and stronger engagement in rehabilitation programs. One study found that phone contact with children reduces the likelihood of rule violations by 27% among incarcerated women.⁸ Overall, facilities that implement free phone calls report fewer incidents of violence — by about 20% — and calmer, more manageable environments⁹ — a benefit to both incarcerated people and corrections staff alike.

Corrections staff are speaking out about the improvements to their own lives. Following the implementation of free phone calls in San Francisco County, Sheriff Paul Miyamoto testified, “It’s been almost two years since our calls were free here. It’s been a very positive change for everyone — our staff, our incarcerated, and their families. Free phone calls had a calming effect on the environment in our custodial facilities. And there’s been a decrease in some of the challenges that we’ve had in management of our population.”¹⁰ Similarly, Bill Heinzen, a spokesman for the New York City Board of Corrections described the impact that this policy had in the city’s correctional institutions, “providing free telephone service to people in custody is a humane and positive way to connect people in custody with their families and communities. By contrast, not providing free calls may give rise to isolation, jealousy, and abuse of access to telephone calls, all of which endanger people in custody and correctional staff.” A correctional administrator from Connecticut remarked, “it’s not going to stop all the incidents, but it’s definitely curbing a lot of them... as someone who works inside the walls, I can say that it is working, and we do appreciate it.”

Commissioner Schnell did raise concerns about gang activity monopolizing phone access, but he also confirmed that these challenges existed before this policy was in place — and that there are already plans underway to address them. Under Minnesota’s current system, corrections officials retain full authority to manage phone usage and respond to misuse. The department has already begun implementing measures to address these issues without losing the substantial benefits of the policy.

Minnesota’s decision to make prison phone calls free was a compassionate, evidence-based step forward — one that supports safer prisons, healthier families, and a more effective correctional

⁸ Jiang, Shanhe, and L. Thomas Winfree. “Social Support, Gender, and Inmate Adjustment to Prison Life: Insights From a National Sample.” *The Prison Journal* 86, no. 1 (2006): 32–55.

⁹ Rocheleau, A. M. (2015). Ways of Coping and Involvement in Prison Violence. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 59(4), 359–383.

See also: Solinas-Saunders, Monica, and Melissa J. Stacer. “Prison Resources and Physical/Verbal Assault in Prison: A Comparison of Male and Female Inmates.” *Victims & Offenders* 7, no. 3 (July 2012): 279–311.

¹⁰ California State Assembly. (2022, June 14). *Assembly Public Safety Committee Hearing*. California State Assembly.

system. The challenges expressed in this hearing should be cured through changes in implementation and are not justification for undoing a policy that clearly works. Rolling back that progress would have undermined public safety, harmed children, and abandoned the state's responsibility to invest in rehabilitation. **We thank you for not including HF 2812 in HF 2432, and urge you to ensure this effort to reverse progress moves no further.**

Thank you again, and please do not hesitate to reach out with questions at cchapin@worthrises.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Celina Chapin".

Celina Chapin
Chief Advocacy Officer
Worth Rises