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Support for S.1372: An Act relative to inmate telephone calls

I'm writing on behalf of the Prison Policy Initiative in strong support of S.1372: An Act relative to inmate telephone calls, which will provide no cost telephone calls to incarcerated people and their receiving parties, including family members, loved ones, and legal counsel.

The Prison Policy Initiative was founded in 2001 to document and publicize how mass incarceration undermines our national welfare. We are best known for leading effective campaigns for justice reform, such as our projects to end prison gerrymandering and to protect families from the predatory prison and jail telephone industry.

In Massachusetts, there are thousands of people held in jails pre-trial because they cannot afford bail, and they pay almost 3 times as much for phone calls as people incarcerated in Massachusetts state prisons. When people can't get together the funds to get out of jail, exorbitant phone rates only make a difficult time even harder. Pretrial detention is an extremely stressful experience; detainees are often at risk of losing their jobs, housing, and even custody of their children. Being locked up, even for a short time, can interrupt medical care and can exacerbate mental health problems. It's no coincidence that suicide risk is highest in the first week of jail incarceration.

Calls with loved ones are essential for people under these conditions, who may need to coordinate childcare or elder care, make arrangements for missing work, have prescriptions brought to the facility, or simply have someone to talk to while incarcerated. Expensive phone calls further punish people in jails – most of whom have not been convicted of a crime.

Making phone calls free for incarcerated people would help people who are held pre-trial organize their defense: as it is, costly phone calls limit how often and how long pretrial detainees can talk to their families and friends in the service of their defense. This makes it harder for defense attorneys to coordinate with family to build mitigation cases or track down witnesses. As a result, pretrial detainees often present a weaker defense than they would have if they had been able to make calls freely.

On a systemic level, high phone rates from jails hurt indigent defendants by draining already-scarce resources from public defenders' offices.

In state prisons, increased communication with loved ones has been shown to reduce misconduct in facilities by lowering anxiety and tension. Providing no cost telephone communications for people incarcerated in state prisons would strengthen the bonds of family ties, while increasing the chances of successful reentry.

As it stands, the cost of phone calls from people incarcerated in state prisons sucks money from the pocketbook of family members, punishing them for the

incarceration of their loved one. With the financial burdens and uncertainty brought by COVID-19, family members have to choose between essential groceries and a phone call with a loved one.

Now, more than ever, the case is clear for providing no cost phone calls for people incarcerated in our state prisons and jails.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Wendy Sawyer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Wendy Sawyer
Research Director