Dear Senator Tammy Duckworth:

As a coalition of nonprofit organizations and community members that support reforms of the criminal justice system to strengthen the ties between incarcerated people and their loved ones, we are proud to endorse the “Video Visitation in Prisons Act of 2016.”

Prison and jail visitation can have many benefits for incarcerated people and their loved ones, for correctional facilities, and for our communities. Research shows that even a single in-person visit can reduce recidivism by 13%.\(^1\) When incarcerated people are able to maintain ties with their family members on the outside, they are able to turn to their relatives upon release for critical support with finding a job, housing, etc. While we believe that correctional facilities should not restrict visitation, we understand that facilities sometimes use visitation to maintain discipline. Further, there is no way to understaclude the extent to which incarcerated people and their families value visitation. As one person incarcerated in Angola State Prison, Louisiana put it, visits are “like having somebody give you air.”\(^2\)

Unfortunately, too often, our nation’s criminal justice policies fail to recognize and support the powerful and positive role families play in rehabilitation. Video visitation has become an example of this. Video “visitation” is a form of videoconferencing in which incarcerated people and their “visitors” view each other on a screen, rather than face-to-face or through a glass barrier. Seventy-four percent of local jails across the country that adopt video visitation eliminate in-person visits.\(^3\) This trend is not only harmful to families trying to stay together during the isolation of incarceration, but it is also misguided correctional policy. Visiting an incarcerated loved one is already difficult for many. Correctional facilities are often located far away from people’s home communities, making it particularly difficult for families to find the time and money to make the trip. A recent study found that more than a third of families surveyed went into debt to cover phone and visitation costs.\(^4\) Some correctional officials have even publicly recognized how harmful it can be to eliminate in-person visits. As Illinois Department of Corrections Spokesman Tom Shaer explained to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, “I can’t imagine the scenario in which someone would travel to a prison and then wish to communicate through a

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video screen rather than see a prisoner face-to-face.”

Lafourche Parish, Louisiana Sheriff Craig Webre recently told The Times-Picayune in explaining why he will not replace in-person visits with video, “Sometimes you have to put yourself in someone else's shoes and recognize the reality of human interaction, what it means to look someone in the eye and to support them during a difficult period in their life.”

The Video Visitation in Prisons Act would require that the Federal Communications Commission regulate video visitation, including by assuring that rates charged to families are reasonable. While state campaigns in Texas and California have sought to protect in-person visits, only Federal Communications Commission regulations can bring consistency nationwide. And regulating video visitation would be a natural extension of the important work the Federal Communications Commission has already done to reduce the cost of telephone communication home from prisons and jails. In fact, a failure to regulate correctional video technology would allow correctional officials to use video technology as an end run around the Federal Communications Commission’s existing regulations of phone rates.

The Video Visitation in Prisons Act would also require the Bureau of Prisons to continue to provide in-person visits and only use video technology as a supplement to in-person visitation. This bill would be a powerful way for the federal government to recognize and respect the humanity of incarcerated people and lead states and local governments by example.

We are hopeful that the Video Visitation in Prisons Act will be able to protect in-person contact between incarcerated people and their loved ones from becoming a practice of the past.

On behalf of the millions of children of incarcerated parents, we thank you for your leadership and look forward to further supporting the Video Visitation in Prisons Act.

Sincerely,

Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind
Black and Pink
California Coalition for Women Prisoners
California National Organization for Women (California NOW)
Campaign for Prison Phone Justice
Center for Community Alternatives
Center for Media Justice
Chicago Community Bond Fund
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
Dignity and Power Now
Ella Baker Center for Human Rights
Essie Justice Group
From Life to Life
Global Action Project
Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of the Deaf (HEARD)
Human Rights Defense Center

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Illinois Campaign for Prison Phone Justice
Justice for Families
Justice Strategies
Legal Services for Prisoners with Children
Lewisburg Prison Project
Line Break Media
Media Action Grassroots Network (MAG-Net)
Media Alliance
Media Mobilizing Project
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Council For Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls
National Immigration Justice Center
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund
New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City
One Million Americans, Ltd.
Opportunities, Alternatives, And Resources Of Tompkins County, Inc.
People’s Press Project
Pinky’s Mission, Inc.
Prison Activist Resource Center
Prison Policy Initiative
Reentry Central
Returning Home Foundation
Solitary Watch
Southside Media Project
Survived and Punished
The Real Cost of Prisons Project
Together to End Solitary
T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
UCLA Prison Law and Policy Program
United Church of Christ, OC Inc.
Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center
Voice of the Experienced (VOTE)
Witness to Mass Incarceration
Women’s Prison Association
Working Narratives
Youth Justice Coalition

Rachel Roth
Natalie J. Sokoloff
Dr. Artika R. Tyner
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