

Senator Tammy Duckworth  
SD-G12 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

January 17, 2017

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%.<sup>1</sup> 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 understate 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Minnesota Department of Corrections, *The Effects of Prison Visitation on Offender Recidivism* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Department of Corrections, November 2011), p 27. Accessed on December 3, 2014 from: <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/pages/files/large-files/Publications/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> “Prison visits crucial, but miles and money separate families,” *The Times-Picayune*, Accessed on January 13, 2017 from: [http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2017/01/parental\\_incarceration\\_visits.html#incart\\_push](http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2017/01/parental_incarceration_visits.html#incart_push).

<sup>3</sup> Bernadette Rabuy and Peter Wagner, *Screening Out Family Time: The for-profit video visitation industry in prisons and jails* (Easthampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, January 2015). Accessed on January 13, 2017 from: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/visitation/report.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Saneta deVuono-powell, Chris Schweidler, Alicia Walters, and Azadeh Zohrabi, *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families* (Oakland, CA: Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Forward Together, and Research Action Design, September 2015). Accessed on January 13, 2017 from: <http://whopaysreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Who-Pays-FINAL.pdf>.

video screen rather than see a prisoner face-to-face.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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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<sup>5</sup> Paul Hampel, “Video visits at St. Clair County Jail get mixed reviews,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 20, 2014. Accessed on December 22, 2014 from: [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/video-visits-at-st-clair-county-jail-get-mixed-reviews/article\\_b46594b0-9f01-5987-abf0-83152f76c9dd.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/video-visits-at-st-clair-county-jail-get-mixed-reviews/article_b46594b0-9f01-5987-abf0-83152f76c9dd.html).

<sup>6</sup> “Prison visits crucial, but miles and money separate families,” *The Times-Picayune*, Accessed on January 13, 2017 from: [http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2017/01/parental\\_incarceration\\_visits.html#incart\\_push](http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2017/01/parental_incarceration_visits.html#incart_push).

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

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