Personal Impact Statements from
Directly Impacted Community Members
in Connecticut

To Whom it May Concern

I am writing in support of HB 6714. I cannot afford to pay to make phone calls to my son in jail. Instead, my sister or my other son has a Securus account, then when my son calls them, they connect to my phone. But it doesn’t always work, because you aren’t supposed to do it. And also, it’s not private. My sister or my other son are always listening in. Sometimes I need to be able to talk about things in private, but I can’t do that. Even if I could afford to pay for the calls, I don’t know how to link up to Securus. I’m 57 years old, I don’t know how to do it. It’s awful not being able to talk to my son regularly. He didn’t used to call very often, but recently he’s been calling 4-5 times a week. He didn’t used to do this, it’s getting worse in there, I’m afraid for him.

If phone calls were free then I could talk to my son without worrying about the money, and without worrying about privacy. If I could talk to him regularly then I would be able to talk to him like a mother should be able to, and I wouldn’t worry so much about his mental health.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Bridgett Williamson
New Haven

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in support of HB 6714, which would make phone calls free for people who are incarcerated. When my boyfriend was incarcerated, I frequently paid to be able to speak with him. I had to put an account on my phone, then they took money right off my debit account, every time I called. I’d put twenty dollars on it at a time, which would last about a week, or a week and a day or two. Each call is fifteen minutes a phone call, and it cost something like $3.50 for the fifteen minutes. The whole thing stressed me out. And it made me feel like I didn’t want to be bothered. I felt like I didn’t want to help him anymore, because I was struggling out here to maintain that phone bill and had to keep paying for my household. So, then I would just shut him off. Not talk. Not let him call. Not send him anything. I would just shut down my feelings. Which wasn’t helpful for him, but there was nothing else I could do.

If phone calls were free, then people like myself would be able to talk with our loved ones without worrying about the cost. It’s hard enough when your partner is incarcerated – it is even harder on the relationship when you can’t communicate regularly.

Yours Sincerely
Shaniqua Taylor
Norwalk
To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in support of HB 6714. When I was incarcerated, regular communication with my loved ones was essential for me to maintain my physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health. All of those things suffered because I couldn’t manage to communicate with them. I missed news about family events and functions, and I saw my fellow inmates suffer from not being able to speak with their loved ones, to hear their children’s voices. Communication is very important, the world is still moving, it’s pretty much stagnated where you are, but society is still moving ahead, you want to hear about it, not just watch the news and hear about the bad stuff happening out there.

The problem with the phone is that it costs so much, and whoever you need to talk to has to pay for it. Each phone number you want to call has to put the money on. You can’t just call anyone. Each phone number you want to call has to put the money on. You can’t just call anyone. They always have to put the money on the phone. There were so many times I wanted to call but couldn’t because I realized that there was no money on the account. It’s an empty feeling when you make that call but can’t get through. Something you want to get stuff off your chest, and you really need to talk with someone. But you call and there’s no money on the account. You start thinking they didn’t put money on because they don’t want to talk to you. You fight down the feeling of wanting to call, then you call and the person is stressed out, busy, can’t talk right now, and you start to worry. And you worry that you’re being a burden. They’re out there trying to take care of their bills, and you become another bill, by trying to keep in contact with them.

It’s also very time consuming, because you are only allowed to use the phone at certain times, and there are so many people waiting to use the phone. And then you only get 15 minute slots then the call expires. And you have to pay for the full 15 minutes even if someone else picks up and the person you want to talk to isn’t there, or they are busy and have to get off the call early.

It would be amazing if they could make the phone free, or more affordable.

Chris Barrett, New Haven

This is in regards to HB No. 6714 An Act Concerning The Cost Of Telecommunication Services in Correctional Services. I realize that there will be those opposing this saying that they don’t deserve their communication to their loved ones for free. However, it is not them but the loved ones who bear the costs of the phone calls, money that could be spent in our communities. Also there have been numerous studies that have shown that those incarcerated who are able to communicate and visit with loved ones have a lower recidivism rate. That being said, I would like to put the human side to this.

Regardless of their crime these inmates are mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, sons, and daughters of our friends, co-workers, neighbors, etc.; they are human beings who like the rest of us can have to deal with an illness or even death of a loved one. In order for the incarcerated loved one to be able to call family that family has to endure not only costs related to the illness or death of the loved one outside but high telephone costs.

Recently my husband who is incarcerated lost his mother, the money I had put on the phone for two weeks was used up in three days. He or I should not have to worry about phone costs at a time like this.
The other aspects of this bill the email and video visits would have helped tremendously both in the past. If there had been video visit he and his mother (who had not seen him in about a year) could have done video visits. I could have arranged a video visit the day of his mother’s services so for at least 15 minutes or however long so he could have felt part of it.

I would like to see this bill pass so my husband and I could continue and increase our communication so that we can prepare for his eventual release. Let’s not just look at the financial side of this bill but the human side.

Respectfully Submitted,
Lisa Gentley

My name is Diane Forino,*

I am from Waterbury. As a parent of an inmate, the whole journey is a nightmare from start to end.

Being able to hear my son’s voice and let him have some contact with his family on the outside is so important because we can’t always visit in person. Depending on which facility he is at, driving to visit can cost too much, too. I know a lot of our family hasn’t talked to my son since he went in years ago because they can’t visit or afford the calls.

The phone calls are very expensive and a not for a long amount of time. We only get to talk a couple times a week because of money but I know he wants to call and talk a lot more than I can afford. That hurts as his mother.

To date, I have spent $4,320 to talk to my son.

Name has been changed for anonymity*

My name is Amanda Rogers.* I am a resident of Windsor. My boyfriend is currently incarcerated in a Connecticut state prison for his second DUI. My boyfriend has been in jail for 2 months and I have spent $350 on caller fees to date in order to talk to him a couple times a day for 15 minutes each.

Despite the costs, the quality of sound is terrible and the calls are filled with an incessant beep as our time expires. There have actually been a few calls that we spent more time asking each other to repeat what we had just said because the phone cut out or was so soft you couldn’t hear anything.

So why was it so important to be able to talk to my boyfriend despite the high costs out of my pocket? I am his support system. The phone calls let me be the support he needs and isn’t receiving in prison. I want him through this difficult time. The calls allow him to open up to me so that he doesn’t drive himself crazy while there with no one to talk to about his feelings. I keep him sane on a daily basis so that he can get parole half way through his sentence and cost the state less money. I am his therapist, doctor, and mentor that the prison system has failed to adequately provide him.

Many of you wonder why so many of ex-prisoners end up back in prison. Because they aren’t given the resources and support they need to be successful once they return to society. Maintaining contact with your loved ones is so important.
I’m so thankful that my boyfriend has me and his mom to talk to a couple times a day. Unfortunately, I’m not rich and it has caused a hardship on my financial well-being. But that’s why I am sharing my story - for anyone else in this scenario in the future, they should be able to talk to their loved ones at a cheaper cost.

Name has been changed for anonymity*

My name is Veronica Ortiz* and my ex-boyfriend is in a Hartford state prison. He violated his probation by trespassing due to his homelessness.

I stay in contact with him because I became a temporary foster parent to his son once he went to jail. Even though me and him are not together, we have to stay in contact for his son. His son asks to talk to his father every day and my ex wants to continue talking to his son every day.

The phone calls become pricey by having to pay for minutes so they can call each other as often as possible. My foster child and my ex talk about 7 days a week and sometimes twice a day or more. I don’t really have a choice but to pay for the calls because I know they help the child and my ex. Because I am the caregiver for his son right now, his son’s well-being impacts me. If the child isn’t happy then I am not happy and it makes it hard to take care of him. His son loves talking to him every day especially before and after school.

I have trouble getting by because I have to think about saving money just to spend it on the calls and am now also caring for his young child. You don’t realize how quickly the minutes pass and just how much it adds up each day, week and month.

Sometimes I spend more than $40.00 a week when I can spend that on gas or food instead of the calls. The cost of calls only hurts the family and child.

Name has been changed for anonymity*

My name is Rebecca Mitchell*. I live in Enfield, Connecticut. My brother has been in and out of state prisons over the past decade for issues related to his substance abuse and mental health.

Luckily he is not in prison right now, but when he was, I would put $10.00-20.00 on his account weekly so he could talk to me – at minimum.

Eighty-dollars a month may not seem like much but I was then and am still scraping by for my family of 4. Our household income is around $30,000 a year.

I did not commit any crime. I should not have to pay to talk to my loved one who needs his family support system while behind bars more than ever.

Name has been changed for anonymity*
My name is Yolanda Cortes* from Bridgeport. My daughter has gone to YCI four times in the past 8 years. I have been the caregiver for my grandson each incarceration. He will be 14 years old in April; I have been doing this since he was 8 years old. I am on disability and I train in a program called Maturity Works, for people 55 and over; training to return to active employment.

My pay is $10.10 an hour; with me being paid for 20 hours a week. I am not only responsible for his upkeep, I choose to stay in the home with which he has been raised. In staying in the home, I am responsible for rent, lights, gas, and the water bill. I also must deposit at least $40.00 per month to Securus Technologies for my daughter to be able to call home and keep in contact with her son. There are months when I have to put lesser amounts on the phone because I find myself choosing between adding the usual amount and giving up on something else. With her son being a teenager there are so many things that he wants or needs; I don't like it when I have to tell him he can't get it. I receive food stamps and medical for him but no cash from anywhere! I do this so that my grandson doesn't have to go into the system.

I myself had been incarcerated and have been home for almost 14 years. To have been in that position has me more aware of the situation faced prisoners, especially mothers who have children which they left behind. Some never get to speak to their child (ren) during their entire incarceration. The children are the ones who suffer the most. Some caregivers aren't as fortunate as myself to be able to make the choice of keeping the contact between my daughter and grandson open.

As government, state, local, and federal officials continue to make sweeping changes aimed at second chance laws and reducing recidivism, we must remember that keeping the children and parents’ lines of communication open is just as important to the effects of incarceration as is changing the vicious cycle.

These phone calls cost $4+ for 15 minutes; if you put $20.00, that amounts to approximately a little over four phone calls in a month. That does not make a great working relationship between both mother and child.

Name has been changed for anonymity*

My name is Lucy Smith*. I am a licensed child psychologist in private practice with an office in Wilton, CT. I volunteered weekly at a women’s Federal Prison in Connecticut for 27 years.

While I can’t give you the dollar amount spent for the phone calls, I can tell you that the entire phone situation is extremely stressful for inmates through many discussions on the subject.

When you consider that most of the women have children and are trying to maintain close contact so as not to contribute to raising yet another generation of children with absent mothers, this should be an essential right, not a perk.

Most of the mothers I worked with were 100% committed to being the best role model and emotional supporter of their kids as possible for them while incarcerated. There was always a line for the limited number of phones, and for those with few financial resources, the limited time they could afford was inconsistent with their desire to participate as fully as possible in their children’s lives.
The whole point of prison is, or should be, rehabilitation, but in my experience, the stress and hardship, the often uncaring and even harsh treatment and judgment by prison personnel created needless stress and emotional distress, which could be dispelled by speaking with loved one - friends and family, on the telephone. I am totally in favor of allowing this basic right of communication with family through the telephone in all prisons across the country, but starting with my state of Connecticut.

Name has been changed for anonymity*

My name is Emily Holmes.*

I am from Waterbury. My brother being incarcerated and having to pay so much to talk to him on the phone makes things really rough due to my situation – being a single mother works to live check to check with no child support.

He has been incarcerated for 5+ years now and I feel bad that I can’t talk to him as much as I would like or as he would. Its just too expensive for me. I have a child to take care of and myself so we usually have to communicate via mail.

It hurts me that I can’t afford more minutes for calls and I know it hurts my brother too. Cheaper calls, if not free altogether, would be a beautiful thing for families with someone in prison.

I don’t want his incarceration to break our relationship.

Name has been changed for anonymity*

My name is Joy Haenlein, Program Director for CLICC – Connecting through Literacy: Incarcerated Parents, their Children and Caregivers and co-leader of the weekly CLICC group at the York female facility.

CLICC uses reading and mentoring to increase communication and strengthen relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. CLICC operates Connecticut’s first — and only — statewide mentoring network for children of incarcerated parents. CLICC is an intensive support and completely voluntary program that involves the parent, child and child’s caregiver.

CLICC has worked with mothers at York every week for more than 4 years. Twelve mothers are currently enrolled with applications pending. Below are some thoughts from the incarcerated mothers of CLICC.

As a group, CLICC mothers wrote the following statement of support:

- “Free calls would maintain safety and security at YCI and improve the mental health of incarcerated mothers.”

On the importance of communication with their children:

- “A lot of women are not used to leaving their kids at all. They get a lot of time (long sentence) and they don’t know how to deal with it. They end up in mental health (unit) or try to commit suicide. If they had access to free phone or video calls, it would be huge for them.”
- “A lot of people here act out because they can’t get in touch with their families.”
“Women make themselves sick when they can’t get in contact with their families. This would save money by decreasing spending on mental health.”

Support for free phone calls:
- “Sometimes we can’t call because we are on lockdown or don’t have any money on our phone (accounts.) Kids can blame themselves and think they’ve done something bad and that’s why we are not calling.”

Support for free video calls (in conjunction with in-person visits):
- “My child does not want to talk on the phone all the time. If he could see me and see that I’m okay - he wouldn’t be tortured by the fact that I’m here. It would put his mind at ease.”
- “It’s been three years since I saw my children. They have been adopted, so I have no parental rights. The last time my daughter came to see me, she had a bad experience. I don’t know if the family was afraid to bring my children back up here, but they haven’t come since that time. I currently have no contact with them. I might have had communication with my kids the entire time I was here if they had that (video calls) option.”
- “When children come here, they can’t bring stuff in with them. With video calls, they could show us their school work and the activities they are involved with.”
- “If we could see that they are cleaning their room, doing their homework and helping out, it would help us to be more of a co-parent and more of a mother.”

On behalf of CLICC and incarcerated parents, we urge your support for House Bill 6714.

Joy Haenlein
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