Testimony on H.B. No. 6714
An act concerning the cost of telecommunications services in correctional facilities.

Testimony from Bianca Tylek, Executive Director of Worth Rises, before the Connecticut Assembly Judiciary Committee

Monday, March 25, 2019

Good morning. My name is Bianca Tylek and I am the Executive Director at Worth Rises. We are a national, nonprofit, criminal justice advocacy organization committed to dismantling the prison industrial complex and ending the exploitation of those it touches.

Last year, we led a legislative campaign in New York City that successfully made calls out of its city jails free—a first in the nation. Since then, we have been working in cities and states across the country to make calls out of our nation’s prisons and jails free. We’re excited to be here today to support Connecticut in its effort to become the first state to pass legislation that would make not just calls, but all communication out of its correctional facilities free.

As my time is brief and you will be hearing a great deal of testimony today from directly impacted community members, I would like to use my time to highlight the extractive business model employed by the prison telecommunication industry and the grave impact that it has on incarcerated people and their support networks in the state of Connecticut.
Since 2012, Connecticut has contracted with Securus Technologies, a national prison telecommunications corporation.1 Across the country, Securus capitalizes off the need for human connection and, understanding the vulnerability of the people subjected to its services, charges exorbitant rates for loved ones to stay in contact.

Let me give you a few examples: In the Mississippi County Detention Center in Arkansas, Securus charges $25 for a simple 15-minute phone call.2 In the Hardin County Jail in Kentucky, it charges $13.00 for a 20-minute video call.3 And in New York City, Securus charges $3.95 for a 5-second voicemail.

The situation is hardly different here in Connecticut. Since taking up its contract with Securus in 2012, Connecticut has dramatically trailed other states in the fight for prison phone justice. In 2008, Connecticut ranked 29th in affordability for a 15-minute phone call. More than 10 years later, Connecticut now ranks 49th, in front of only Arkansas, with a 15-minute phone call priced at $3.65.4

Using these exploitative practices, in 2017, Securus brought in $628 million in revenue,5 And thanks to the commission arrangement that Connecticut has with Securus, the state collected nearly $8 million in kickbacks the corporation that same year.6

See, annually Connecticut’s economically distressed communities pay roughly $15 million for prison phone calls.7 And for seven years now, the state has been taking 68% of that in corporate kickbacks to fund the Department of Correction, Department of Administrative Services, and Judicial Department.8 It’s the mothers, fathers, children, spouses, siblings, and grandparents of those inside who are paying for these calls and in doing so paying an unjust special tax to fund state operations. It’s shameful, and I must believe it flies in the face of Connecticut’s values.

And on top of the moral imperative that Connecticut has to not just correct for the future, but also repair the past with respect to its exploitation of these communities, it can afford to do so. While the $22 million annual price tag of providing fee phone calls may seem daunting, comparatively, it represents less

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3 Securus, Company Website: Facilities and Pricing.
5 Platinum Equity, An Introduction to Platinum Equity. (Apr. 2018)
than 2% of the annual budget of the three impacted state agencies, which together have an annual budget of $1.2 billion.⁹ That said, we believe that this figure represents an over estimation of the bill’s cost. When New York City analyzed the cost of providing free phone calls, it estimated the cost would be equivalent to what was currently being spent to pay for call minutes. A similar approach would make the cost of calls in Connecticut $13.5 million, or just 1% of the annual budget of the three impacted state agencies.

But as I already noted, these numbers are just a part of the story. Here’s the personal account of one directly impacted mother:

“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…. I don’t really have a choice but to pay for the calls because I know they help the child and my ex…. 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.”

For years, Securus has gouged Connecticut’s incarcerated and their support networks and its current contract was just extended until 2021.¹⁰ Without H.B. 6714, Securus and the state will continue to drain millions of dollars from the people who can least afford it for years to come.

H.B. 6714 has put a national spotlight on Connecticut. Directly impacted people and prison phone justice advocates across the country are looking on. New York City Councilmember Keith Powers and Fines & Fees Justice Center Executive Director Joanna Weiss, among others who couldn’t be here, have submitted written testimony. There are also many inside for whom a public hearing and an email address are simply inaccessible. I hope you still hear them through those here today.

I implore you to protect vulnerable communities from predatory phone charges and pass H.B. 6714 because a call to dad has no price.

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