June 18, 2019

Senator Holly Mitchell
State Capitol, Room 5050
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: SB 555 (Mitchell): Jail FACTS Act - SUPPORT

Dear Senator Mitchell,

On behalf of the City and County of San Francisco, I write in support of SB 555 (Mitchell), the Jail Fair Access for Connections to Support (FACTS) Act. The Jail FACTS Act will reduce the heavy financial burden placed on the families and support systems of incarcerated individuals. SB 555 aims to reduce the high cost of communication (including phone calls, video visitation and electronic communications), regulate the prices for goods sold inside county jails (hygiene products and food), and require that profits made from these services are reinvested to support people incarcerated in California County Jails, as well as their transition back into their communities.

The City and County of San Francisco has led the state and nation in assessing and reforming how fines and fees affect our vulnerable residents, including individuals in jails. San Francisco is the first city in the nation to launch a Financial Justice Project, housed in the Treasurer’s Office, to assess and reform how fees and fines impact our cities’ most vulnerable residents. Earlier this month, I stood alongside San Francisco Mayor London Breed and Sheriff Vicki Hennessy as we announced that San Francisco will become the first county in the nation to make all phone calls free from the county jail, and to end the markup on commissary items. San Francisco will no longer generate revenue from incarcerated people and their loved ones.

Phone call and jail store/commissary costs are a significant economic drain on low-income people. In San Francisco, if someone makes two 15-minute phone calls a day, it will cost $300 over 70 days (the average jail stay) or $1,500 over the course of the year. Commissary items are sold with a 43 percent markup. More than half of the revenue generated went to San Francisco’s “Inmate Welfare Fund,” totaling more than $1.5 million from incarcerated people and their loved ones.

California county jails have been shown to charge up to $17 for a 15-minute phone call, which is nearly 3 times as high as the cost in California state prisons. Furthermore, markups on commissary items make it difficult, if not impossible, for incarcerated people to afford basic necessities. The high

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cost of utilizing these services disrupts not only the economic stability of incarcerated people, but also their families and support systems on the outside.

These costs have devastating impacts on families and communities, specifically those financially supporting incarcerated loved ones. Research shows that 1-in-3 families with incarcerated loved ones go into debt due to the costs of phone calls and visits alone. The cost of keeping in touch with incarcerated people falls most heavily on their families, and disproportionately on low-income women of color. Research shows the cost is most often borne by low-income women of color. In a national survey of incarcerated people and their families, eighty-two percent of survey participants reported that family members were primarily responsible for phone and visitation costs. Of the family members who were responsible for the costs, 87% were women. Because of these costs, incarcerated people often lose connection with support systems on the outside. This can have serious mental health implications and makes the process of preparing for reentry even more difficult.

Increased communication between incarcerated people and their loved ones decreases recidivism and improves reentry outcomes after release. Phone calls are people’s lifelines to their support networks. Staying in touch with family and support networks helps people get through their time in jail; maintain families ties that they’ll need to rely on when they get out; plan for a place to live and find work.

For these reasons, San Francisco announced earlier this month that our city would provide no-cost phone calls from our county jails and will end the practice of marking up items in the jail store. By passing SB 555, California can become a champion and leader in promoting economic stability within communities most impacted by the criminal justice system.

Respectfully,

José Cisneros
Treasurer, City and County of San Francisco

Cc: Women’s Policy Institute Criminal Justice Team
    Senator Scott Wiener
    Assemblymember David Chiu
    Assemblymember Phil Ting

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