April 23, 2020

National Governors Association  
444 North Capitol Street, Suite 267  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Governor Larry Hogan and all other Governors,

The COVID-19 outbreak has overwhelmed many public systems, and the correctional system is no different. Prisons and jails are breeding grounds for infection as people are crowded into tight quarters and forced to share cells, and showers, making social distancing impossible and allowing disease to spread rapidly. To make matters worse, many incarcerated people are now also facing isolation from their families thanks to the high rates charged by prison telecom corporations for phone calls, video calls, and emails.

These conditions put not just incarcerated people at grave risk of COVID-19 infection, but also the correctional officers and staff entrusted with their care who go home to their families every day. Correctional health is public health, and the only solution to curb the rapid spread of COVID-19 is to depopulate prisons and jails by releasing people, especially those who are elderly, immuno-compromised, have less than a year left on their sentences, or held pretrial on charges that do not involve allegations of serious and intentional physical harm.

For those left behind, communication is among their most important needs, now more than ever, especially as prison and jail visits are suspended. Beyond the grave risk of infection, incarcerated people are now also facing isolation from their families, which is exacerbated by the predatory rates prison telecom corporations charge for phone calls, video calls, and emails. The COVID-19 outbreak is highlighting the tragic reality that incarcerated people and their families have been living with for decades: the inability to afford communication.
Even under normal conditions, families struggle to stay connected with incarcerated loved ones. Prison telecom corporations charge families up to $25 for a 15-minute call,\(^1\) forcing families to decide whether to pay for rent or a call with a loved one behind bars. In fact, nearly one third of families with incarcerated loved ones goes into debt trying to stay connected, and 87% of those carrying the burden of these costs are women, largely women of color.\(^2\)

However, things are anything but normal today, and these families, like millions of others, are struggling to stay afloat during this crisis. They are dealing with delayed pay, job loss, unexpected elder and childcare, and, in the worst cases, their own illness. They should not also be worried about whether they can afford to be in contact with incarcerated loved ones at this critical time. Moreover, continuing to charge for communication from prisons and jails will lead to serious consequences for public health. Families who are unable to pay for calls will suffer from stress and despair, which have been shown to weaken immune systems and make people more likely to succumb to infection.

We must address this emergency by providing incarcerated people and their families free access to communication immediately. Doing so will not only alleviate the unjust financial burden placed on these families and prevent worsening health conditions, but also benefit our community in the long-run by allowing incarcerated people to strengthen relationships with their support networks.

More specifically, we ask that you use your executive powers to prohibit correctional administrators and their telecom vendors from charging families or their incarcerated loved ones for phone calls, video calls, and emails during the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand that some prison telecom vendors are offering families one or two phone calls each week in response to the public health crisis, but this is far from enough and insulting to tight-knit families.

Families cannot be expected to ration their calls at a time like this. In fact, in the past few weeks more than 550 telecom corporations have signed the Keep Americans Connected Pledge established by the Federal Communications Commission to ensure no U.S. resident has their communication service terminated due to their inability to pay caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.\(^3\) Notably missing from the signatories are the prison telecom corporations.

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Bringing in more than a billion dollars in revenue together each year, prison telecom vendors can afford to provide families and their incarcerated loved ones with free communication for months at the very least. We implore you to demand they do so. If necessary, we ask that you use emergency funding to gap stop losses in commissions to government agencies during the crisis. And finally, once we have made it passed the COVID-19 pandemic, we ask that you take executive action and support legislation to provide free communication for the long-term.

In light of the COVID-19 outbreak, the high cost of prison and jail communication that separates families can no longer be ignored. You must act now to protect families with incarcerated loved ones. The cost of a call should never bar someone from ensuring their loved one is healthy, or worse yet, from comforting them if they are not.

Sincerely,

Andrea James     Dorsey Nunn
Executive Director,     Executive Director,
National Council of Incarcerated and     Legal Services for Prisoners with Children
Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls

Kevin Ring     Gina Clayton-Johnson
President,     Executive Director,
Families Against Mandatory Minimums     Essie Justice Group

Ebony Underwood
Chief Executive Officer,
WE GOT US NOW

Bianca Tylek     Rashad Robinson
Executive Director,     President,
Worth Rises     Color of Change

The undersigned join us in this call for action.

NATIONAL
A Little Piece Of Light
Abolition Apostles Jail and Prison Ministry
American Federation of Teachers
Black Church PAC
Civil Rights Corps
College and Community Fellowship
Community Change/Action
Community Justice Exchange
Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty
Drug Policy Alliance
Ella Baker Center for Human Rights
Equal Justice Under Law
Equal Justice USA
Fair and Just Prosecution
Fines and Fees Justice Center
Free Press
FWD.us
Galaxy Gives
Grassroots Leadership
Human Rights Defense Center
Imagine Justice
Immigrant Defense Project
Innocence Project
International CURE
Justice Strategies
Justice Support Group
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
Live Free
MediaJustice
Mijente
Movement for Family Power
National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low-income clients)
National Employment Law Project
National Lawyers Guild
National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated
One Community
One Fair Wage
PLUS ONE Society
POPS the Club
Pretrial Justice Institute
Prison Policy Initiative
Represent Justice
Revolve Impact
SawariMedia
Speak Ya Truth
Students for Sensible Drug Policy
Team Roc (Division of Roc Nation)
The Exoneration Project
The Gathering for Justice
The Justice Collaborative  
The Real Cost of Prisons Project  
The Soze Agency  
Transitions Clinic Network  
United Church of Christ, OC  
Until Freedom  
We Are All Criminals  
W.H. Burns Institute – Community Justice Network for Youth  
Witness to Innocence  

**ALABAMA**  
Alabama Justice Initiative  
Southern Poverty Law Center Action Fund  
The Ordinary People Society  

**ALASKA**  
Alaska Innocence Project  

**ARIZONA**  
Poder in Action  
ReInventing ReEntry  
The S.T.A.R.T. Project – Striving To Achieve Reform Together  

**ARKANSAS**  
DecARcerate  
Midwest Innocence Project  

**CALIFORNIA**  
A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment & Healing)  
A New Way of Life Reentry Project  
Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus  
California Innocence Project  
Californians United for a Responsible Budget  
Carceral Tech Resistance Network  
Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice  
Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto  
Community Works  
Dignity & Power NOW  
Friends Committee on Legislation of California  
Homeboy Industries  
Initiate Justice  
Justice League CA  
La Defensa
LA Voice
Media Alliance
Northern California Innocence Project
RE:STORE Justice
Root & Rebound
San Francisco Public Defenders
Starting Over
Young Women's Freedom Center
Youth Justice Coalition

COLORADO
Colorado Circles for Change
Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition
Interfaith Alliance of Colorado

CONNECTICUT
Emmett D. Riley, Deputy Majority Leader & State Representative, District 46
Josh Elliott, State Representative, District 88
Joshua Hall, State Representative, District 7
Kevin Ryan, State Representative, District 139
Kim Rose, State Representative, District 118
Michael Winkler, State Representative, District 56

American Civil Liberties of Union of Connecticut
Collaborative Center for Justice
Communities and Families Raising for Justice
Connecticut Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative (IMRP)
Connecticut Prison Book Connection
New England Innocence Project
New Haven Women's Resettlement Working Group
Once Incarcerated
Our Piece of the Pie (OPP)
Peace Affirmation and Justice Committee of First Congregational Church-Guilford
Progressive Prison Ministries
Sex Workers and Allies Network
Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ
Stop Solitary CT
Women Against Mass Incarceration
Yale Undergraduate Prison Project Advocacy

DELAWARE
Delaware Center for Justice
Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice
FLORIDA

KidsMates
Florida Cares Charity
Florida Justice Center
Florida Rights Restoration Coalition
Southern Poverty Law Center Action Fund

GEORGIA

Dramatic Impulse Theatre
Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Attorneys
Southern Poverty Law Center

HAWAI‘I

Community Alliance on Prisons
Hawai‘i Friends of Restorative Justice

IDAHO

Idaho Innocence Project

ILLINOIS

Believers Bail Out
Building Families Together
Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance
Chicago Community Bond Fund
Children and Family Justice Center
Clean Power Lake County
Coalition to Reduce Recidivism
Crossroads Fund
Heartland Alliance
Illinois Innocence Project
Illinois NOW
John Howard Association
Lawndale Christian Legal Center
Legal Council for Health Justice
Logan Square Neighborhood Association
Moms Demand Action
Mother's Against Wrongful Convictions
Nehemiah Trinity Rising
ONE Northside
Restore Justice
Shiloh Baptist Church of Waukegan
The #LetUsBreathe Collective
The People's Lobby
Unitarian Universalist Prison Ministry of Illinois
West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force
Workers Center for Racial Justice

INDIANA
Constructing Our Future

IOWA
Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Midwest Innocence Project
National Alliance on Mental Illness-Iowa

KANSAS
Midwest Innocence Project

KENTUCKY
Kentucky Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty

LOUISIANA
Daughters Beyond Incarceration
Hope House
Innocence Project New Orleans
Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition
Southern Poverty Law Center
Voice of the Experienced (VOTE)

MARYLAND
Charm City Care Connection
Reproductive Justice Inside
University of Baltimore Innocence Project Clinic

MAINE
New England Innocence Project

MASSACHUSETTS
Emancipation Initiative
Families for Justice as Healing
Greater Boston Legal Services
Massachusetts Against Solitary Confinement (MASC)
New England Innocence Project
Prisoners’ Legal Services of Massachusetts
Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ
Unitarian Universalist Mass Action

**MICHIGAN**
*Advocacy, Re-entry, Resources and Outreach (ARRO)*
*Detroit Justice Center*
*Developing Despite Distance*
*Michigan Citizens for Prison Reform*
*Michigan Innocence Clinic*
*Michigan Liberation*
*Nation Outside*
*Notes From The Village*
*Safe & Just Michigan*

**MINNESOTA**
*Innocence Project of Minnesota*
*ReEntry Matters*

**MISSISSIPPI**
*Innocence Project of Mississippi*
*Southern Poverty Law Center*
*Southern Recovery Advocacy*

**MISSOURI**
*Midwest Innocence Project*

**NEBRASKA**
*Midwest Innocence Project*
*Nebraskans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty*

**NEVADA**
*Nevada Coalition Against the Death Penalty*
*Rocky Mountain Innocence Center*

**NEW HAMPSHIRE**
*Citizens for Criminal Justice Reform*
*New England Innocence Project*

**NEW JERSEY**
*Occupy Bergen County*
*Universalist Congregation at Montclair – Undoing Racism Committee*
*Unitarian Universalist FaithAction NJ*
NEW MEXICO

New Mexico Innocence and Justice Project

NEW YORK

Gustavo Rivera, State Senator, District 33
Luis Sepúlveda, State Senator, District 32
David Weprin, Assemblymember, District 24
Harvey Epstein, Assemblymember, District 74
Inez E. Dickens, Assemblymember, District 70
Jo Anne Simon, Assemblymember, District 52
Nily Rozic, Assemblymember, District 25
Jumaane D. Williams, New York City Public Advocate
Keith Powers, New York City Councilmember, District 4
Jason Starr, Former Assistant Counsel to Governor Cuomo

A Challenge To Change
Alliance of Families for Justice
Brooklyn Community Bail Fund
Brooklyn Defender Services
Center for Community Alternatives
Center for Justice at Columbia University
Children’s Defense Fund-NY
Citizen Action of New York
Close Rosie’s
Community Service Society of New York
Congregation Beth Elohim Dismantling Racism Team
Correctional Association of New York
Exalt Youth
Exodus Transitional Community
Families For Freedom
Fiscal Policy Institute
Graham Windham
Hands Of Hope Outreach Ministries
Indivisible Nation BK
It's A Process
JCCA
Justice League NY
New Hour for Women & Children Long Island
New York Campaign for Alternative to Isolated Confinement (#HALTsolitary)
New York County Defender Services
New York Immigration Coalition
Next100
Osborne Center for Justice Across Generations
Parole Preparation Project
Peter Cicchino Youth Project
Queens Defenders (Formerly Queens Law Associates)
Release Aging People in Prison
Rising Ground
The Bronx Defenders
The New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents
The New York Law School Post Conviction Innocence Clinic
The Osborne Association
The PRADO of Transitioning Forward
United Voices of Cortland
Urban Justice Center
Visionary V
VOCAL-NY
Witness to Mass Incarceration
Women & Justice Project
Women's Community Justice Association

**NORTH CAROLINA**

Beauty After the Bars
Center for Criminal Justice and Professional Responsibility
Conservatives for Criminal Justice Reform
Emancipate NC
Forward Justice
North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence

**NORTH DAKOTA**

Innocence Project of Minnesota

**OHIO**

Central Ohio Restored Citizens’ Collaborative
Filling the Gap
Ohio Rational Sexual Offense Laws

**OREGON**

Carceral Tech Resistance Network

**PENNSYLVANIA**

Dauphin County Bail Fund
Frontline Dads Inc.
Media Mobilizing Project
RHODE ISLAND
COYOTE RI
Formerly Incarcerated Union
Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ

SOUTH CAROLINA
Obsidian Group
Path2Redemption
Root & Rebound
Set Free Ministries

SOUTH DAKOTA
Innocence Project of Minnesota

TENNESSEE
Just City Memphis

TEXAS
University of Texas School of Law – Actual Innocence Clinic
Earl Carl Institute for Legal & Social Policy
Faith in Texas
Texas Criminal Justice Coalition
Texas Inmate Families Association

UTAH
Rocky Mountain Innocence Center

VERMONT
Migrant Justice

VIRGINIA
University Democrats at University of Virginia

WASHINGTON
Carceral Tech Resistance Network
Community Passageways
Washington Innocence Project
What’s Next Washington

WEST VIRGINIA
American Friends Service Committee-WV
WISCONSIN

EX-incarcerated People Organizing (EXPO)
Wisconsin Innocence Project

WYOMING

Rocky Mountain Innocence Center