

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 6, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

We write to urge you to include provisions in the next economic relief package to provide access to free phone and video calls for incarcerated people during and after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

America's prisons and jails currently house more than 2.2 million people,¹ a disproportionate number of whom are people of color.² Before the pandemic, more than 50 percent of families with an incarcerated loved one struggled to pay for housing and food,³ and one in 29 children had a parent incarcerated.⁴ In addition, one in three families with an incarcerated loved one went into debt in order to stay connected with them, and women shouldered 87 percent of these costs.⁵ Now, as many facilities have suspended in-person visits and families face layoffs, furloughs, and evictions due to the pandemic, these calls are more necessary—and cost prohibitive—than ever.

On July 16, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to lower the rate caps for interstate calls from prisons and jails, providing some relief for incarcerated people and their families. But interstate calls make up only 20 percent of all prison phone calls in the U.S., and courts have restricted the FCC's authority to regulate the other 80 percent of calls made within states, allowing telecommunications providers to charge families up to \$25 for fifteen minutes. Without action from Congress to address the rates for in-state calls, families will continue to suffer.

As it remains unclear when effective treatment or a vaccine will be available,⁶ ensuring that incarcerated people can stay connected with their loved ones while in-person visits are suspended is critical—but we must also support solutions to help keep families connected after the pandemic. Regular communication with loved ones has consistently proven to help

¹ Associated Press. (2020, July 22). *Incarcerated people look to Senate to cap prison phone rates*. Retrieved from <https://www.startribune.com/incarcerated-people-look-to-senate-to-cap-prison-phone-rates/571863301/>

² NAACP. 2020 Criminal Justice Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

³ de Vuono-Powell, Saneta et al. "Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families." Ella Baker Center, 2015. <http://ellabakercenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/who-pays.pdf>.

⁴ Harvey, Sylvia. "2.7 Million Kids Have Parents in Prison. They're Losing Their Right to Visit." *The Nation*, 2 December 2015. <https://www.thenation.com/article/2-7m-kids-have-parents-in-prison-theyre-losing-their-right-to-visit/>.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Fauci, Anthony. (2020, May 12). *Hearing on "COVID-19: Safely Getting Back to Work and Back to School"*. U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education Labor & Pensions. Retrieved from <https://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/covid-19-safely-getting-back-to-work-and-back-to-school>

incarcerated people succeed in reentering the workforce after their release,⁷ and allowing them to stay connected will benefit them and their communities in the short and long term. We urge you now to include provisions in the next economic relief package to provide access to free phone and video calls for incarcerated people and their families both during and after the pandemic.

Thank you for your attention to this highly important issue. We stand ready to work with you to help keep families connected at this critical time.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator

/S/

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/S/

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/S/

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/S/

Tina Smith
United States Senator

/S/

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/S/

Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator

⁷ Petersilia, Joan. When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry. Oxford University Press, 2006, p 246.

/S/
Ron Wyden
United States Senator

/S/
Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

/S/
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/S/
Patrick Leahy
United States Senator

/S/
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/S/
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/S/
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator