

Calling for Access to Communication during the COVID-19 Crisis

In 2020, when most people in free society don't pay for phone service but for data and when many cities have installed free calling stations and wi-fi, charging families for prison and jail calls is cruel. But prison telecom corporations and their government partners don't want to give up the money, and so our children, families, and communities suffer—not just in moments of public crisis, but also in moments of individual crisis. Giving families and their incarcerated loved ones free access to communication empowers children, strengthens families, improves reentry success, protects public health and safety, and recognizes humanity.

We must do this now, forever.

CALLS ARE A CRITICAL LIFELINE

- COVID-19 is spreading fast in free society and will spread faster in prisons and jails. Families must be able to check on their incarcerated loved ones regularly and vice versa.
- This is especially true as prisons and jails ban visits. If families can't see their loved ones, they must be able to hear them regularly (and steps must be taken to ensure outside oversight of prison and jail operations).

FAMILIES ARE STRUGGLING FINANCIALLY EVEN MORE

- Families with incarcerated loved ones are typically cash poor and COVID-19 will exacerbate their financial hardship as people are denied paychecks, laid off, saddled with elder & child care, and more.
- Under normal conditions, families can't afford calls. One third of families with incarcerated loved ones goes into debt trying to stay connected, and 87% of those carrying this burden are women—largely women of color. The impact will be worse during this pandemic.

PRISON TELECOM CORPORATIONS ARE CAPITALIZING ON THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

- Prison telecom corporations are offering families at best two free phone calls a week. That's not enough. Families can't be expected to ration calls during a pandemic. Instead, calling hours and infrastructure should be expanded to accommodate increased call volume.
- Worse yet, some of these corporation are offering a few free email "stamps." Emails are free in the outside world, but in prisons and jails they require stamps that can cost up \$0.35, and a stamp is needed for every few paragraphs and for each attachment. We shouldn't have to ask for free emails.
- Together, these corporations make up a \$1.2 billion industry. Securus Technologies alone makes roughly \$700 million each year. Securus and its competitors can afford to give families free phone calls, video calls, and emails for at least a few months. Not to mention, they still have other predatory product lines that will be raking in millions during this period.
- Behind the corporations there is still more money: their multi-billionaire private equity owners, like Tom Gores owner of the Detroit Pistons and Platinum Equity, the firm that owns Securus.