



Testimony for the 2024 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Public Protection

January 22, 2024

Dear Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, and committee members,

My name is Bianca Tylek, and I am the Executive Director of Worth Rises, a national advocacy organization based in New York and dedicated to ending the exploitation of incarcerated people and their families. **I am testifying today to request a budget allocation for an important public safety initiative missing from the proposed FY 2025 Executive Budget: the provision of free prison communication services.**

In the free world, we have a multitude of ways to communicate with our loved ones, often at no cost at all. The same is not true for those who are incarcerated and their families who must rely on expensive and even predatory prison telecom services. Many are going into debt to stay in touch and others are forced to cut communication entirely with grave consequences to incarcerated people, their families and children, and society at large.

At Worth Rises, we have led and supported campaigns across the country to provide free prison and jail communication and are well positioned to support New York in setting similar policy. Most notably, in 2018, we led the first campaign of the sort in New York City, the first jurisdiction in the country to make communication free in its jails. Since then, in addition to the several other cities and counties like San Francisco, San Diego, and Los Angeles we have helped pass and implement this policy, we have also supported five states, including California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Minnesota in doing the same.

Having set this policy in motion, New York should be at the forefront of this movement, not falling behind. The legislature has been considering this policy for three years here, and it is overdue for inclusion in this year's budget. We are grateful to our past sponsors, Senator Jamaal Bailey and Assemblymember Harvey Epstein, who have fought for its inclusion. With three other states passing this policy in just the past year and more than a dozen considering it this year, the time is now. As Senator Bailey and Assemblymember Epstein put it in a 2023 op-ed: "Here's a simple way to improve public safety — make prison phone calls free."

Currently, families are charged per minute for prison phone calls — \$0.53 for 15 minutes. To put that into perspective, an incarcerated person would have to work as many as six hours for a simple 15-minute call. Given the abysmal state of our prison wages, this money comes from the grandparents, parents, siblings, spouses, children, and friends of those inside, who are often forced to choose between necessities like rent and a call with their loved ones. Collectively, New Yorkers spend an astounding \$21.5 million every year on prison calls. With half of these families struggling to make ends meet, one in three goes into debt trying to stay connected. And all that money, which could be spent locally in our communities on groceries, flies out of our state to a Texas-based vendor.

Free communication would allow families to stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones. And creating this access to communication between incarcerated people and their families and children would do more than put money back in the pockets of some of the lowest income New Yorkers, strengthen families, and mitigate trauma for children facing parental incarceration, which of course are important alone. It would also reduce tensions and resulting violence inside, increase hope and participation in rehabilitation programs, increase the chance of securing housing and employment after release, and improve reentry success for people coming home. We all have a serious vested interest in the public safety that can result from that, and I personally attest to that interest as a crime victim.

But as it pertains to this committee, I know that the numbers matter, and they defend this policy. Based on our work across the country, we estimate that we could provide fully free communication services in our state prisons for as little as \$4.1 million per year. That said, as a precaution, we request \$10 million, which is what the Assembly included for this policy last year in its one-house budget. There is no more cost-effective program that the state could implement.

Imagine a simple call with your loved one threatening your financial security — your child unable to hear “I love you” from their parent because you cannot afford it. It is 2024, this barrier to connection is incomprehensible. We urge you to include an appropriation for free prison communication in the FY 2025 budget and put New York back at the front of the pack when it comes to smart criminal justice policy.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Tylek', written in a cursive style.

Bianca Tylek
Executive Director
Worth Rises