



Testimony in Support of SF 666 in the Omnibus Bill SF 3054 to Provide Free Communication to People Incarcerated in Minnesota Prisons and Their Families

April 9, 2025

Dear Chair Hoffman and the Senate Human Services Committee,

My name is Antonya Jeffrey, and I am the Director of Policy Campaigns and Government Affairs at Worth Rises, a national non-profit dedicated to ending the exploitation of people impacted by incarceration. I am here today in **strong support of SF 3054 which includes SF 666**. Minnesota made significant strides in 2023 by making phone calls free for incarcerated people and their loved ones. **By including SF 666, SF 3054 builds on that success by extending free communication to include video calls and electronic messaging, ensuring that incarcerated individuals can maintain meaningful connections with their families.**

Thank you for taking the time to hear testimony regarding this important legislation, and thank you to Sen. Oumou Verbeten for sponsoring this bill. I hope you will take special note of the powerful stories shared by those directly impacted by incarceration and the burdens imposed by the exorbitant cost of prison communication. I will instead focus my testimony on the policy arguments and fiscal considerations that support this legislation.

Worth Rises has helped jurisdictions across the country pass similar policies to provide free communications for incarcerated people and their support networks. We led the first successful state campaign in Connecticut and additional state campaigns in California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and here in Minnesota. We also led or supported successful local campaigns in New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, and Miami. Accordingly, we know what it takes to implement this policy and are committed to helping Minnesota take the next step in making communications free.

Based on our analysis, we project that expanding free communications to include video calls and electronic messaging would cost the state as little as roughly \$750,000 annually. We base our estimate on known rates charged by leading vendors around the country, which in many cases are much lower than rates charged in Minnesota, and usage rates in jurisdictions with free communication.

Notably, in Minnesota, video calls are charged at \$0.23 per minute, which new Federal Communications Commission regulations will require be cut by more than half.¹ However, more

¹ Federal Communications Commission. (n.d.). Incarcerated People's Communications Services. <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/incarcerated-peoples-communications-services>

importantly, there are more competitive rates offered by all the leading prison telecom providers. For example, in Arizona, video calls cost \$0.03 per minute. Similarly, while Minnesota families pay \$0.40 per stamp to send an electronic message, families in California pay \$0.03 per message and, in other states, they pay even less. Please note that there are always new compensation models rolling out that could further lower the cost. Should the DOC and DHS provide additional information, we can furnish more precise cost projections and a detailed analysis of FCC implementation requirements.

Video calls and electronic messaging are important tools for maintaining family bonds under the strain of incarceration. Most incarcerated individuals are housed over 100 miles from home, making regular visits financially and logistically difficult, especially for children.² Video calls help bridge the painful gaps between visits, allowing families to see each other's faces, share school projects, and experience everyday moments that sustain relationships. Similarly, electronic messaging offers a flexible way to stay connected when phone calls are hard to coordinate.

Unlike calls, which often do not allow for voicemails, electronic messaging provides a reliable way to share updates, offer emotional support, and help with reentry planning outside of hard to schedule real-time communications, ensuring that family ties remain strong despite physical separation. Electronic messaging is also particularly important to a younger generation that is more familiar with digital communications.

Importantly, this bill extends to Minnesotans confined in DHS facilities — whether voluntarily or, more commonly, through civil commitment after completing their criminal sentences. There are questions about the ethics of detaining people beyond their judicial sentences, but at a minimum the state has a duty and interest in their treatment and rehabilitation in order to eventually reintegrate them into their communities. Positive engagement with loved ones can significantly improve and hasten treatment outcomes by providing crucial support, ultimately easing the process of reentry.

Overall, decreasing barriers to accessing critical communications like video calls and electronic messaging would only bolster the rehabilitative efforts of the Department of Human Services. It helps to reduce isolation and suffering, provide a sense of stability, safety, and encouragement and help to develop self-esteem, confidence, and hope.³ We thank you again for including SH 666 in SF 3054 and hope for its passage so that Minnesota may continue to lead with smart, humane practices that strengthen families and improve public safety. Please do not hesitate to reach out with questions at ajeffrey@worthrises.org.

Sincerely,



Antonya Jeffrey
Director of Policy Campaigns and Government Affairs
Worth Rises

² Sawyer, W., & Bertram, W. (2018). "Separation by Bars and Miles." Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/prisonvisits.html>

³ ³ Wong, Leah. "Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families." Prison Policy Initiative, 2021. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/