

Dear Oregon legislators,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this bill. My name is Gabriela Vasquez and I live in Redmond, Oregon. My brother is incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary, which is several hours away, and over a mountain, from my home. As a result, I am only able to visit him a few times a year, and so phone calls have become crucial for our ability to stay connected. We have talked on the phone every few days since the beginning of his incarceration twelve years ago.

For the first few years of his incarceration, my brother felt isolated from our family, and that took a heavy toll on him emotionally. I love my brother and never want to see him feel left out or forgotten. Through phone calls, I have been able to keep him updated about what is going on in our family and even include him in important family events. For example, when my daughter was born, we set up a video call. I remember it was so pixelated we could hardly see each other, but it was nonetheless an amazing experience. My brother was one of the first people my daughter met. He has expressed how much these kinds of connections mean to him. They reassure him that he is still part of the family.

Our phone calls have also been a crucial source of support for me. We have a large family, and a lot of our family members have had serious struggles. My brother is one of few people I can talk to who understands those dynamics. For example, about two years ago, one of our brothers tragically passed away by suicide. Our relationship had been complicated before his passing, as he had struggled heavily with addiction, making it necessary for me to obtain custody of his children and establish firm boundaries with him. After his passing, I struggled with unhealthy feelings of self-blame and regret for not having been able to provide him with more support. It was through phone calls with my brother in prison that we were able to heal from that situation together. He helped me process what happened and work through my unhealthy feelings. His support throughout that situation, as well as countless others, has meant everything to me.

Nonetheless, all of our phone calls have been affected by financial stress. I try to make sure I am the one spending money on our calls so my brother can use his limited money to call others. This costs me around \$100 per month, and sometimes more. During months I am struggling financially (for instance, when my car needs to be repaired), paying for these phone calls becomes difficult. Even when it is easier, the cost of phone calls still takes away from my ability to give him money to buy accommodations for himself like socks and shampoo. I want to talk to him as much as I can, but I don't want that to come at the cost of him being able to take care of himself, so we have to balance the two. If phone calls were free, we could talk much more often. And he would be able to speak with every one of his siblings, several of whom have limited money and have not been able to afford to call him.

I believe it is crucial for Oregonians to be able to stay connected with their family members in prison. From the perspective of a family member, I have learned that it is very easy to lose yourself in prison, and to lose sight of what is important, if you are unable to stay connected with your loved ones. I strongly support prison phone calls being made free in Oregon.

Sincerely,

Gabriela Vasquez
Redmond, Oregon
(541) 213-0054