

Dear Oregon legislators,

My name is Natalie Belles and my fiancé is incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary. He has been incarcerated for our entire relationship, which began four years ago. I initially met him through his family. We started off as simple penpals, but after a few months of mail correspondence, we developed feelings for one another and began talking on the phone every day. My kids and I live in Northern California, more than six hours away from OSP, so we have only been able to visit my fiancé a few times per year. It has therefore been mainly through our daily phone calls that our relationship has been built. I believe that getting to know each other on a personal level, before anything physical, has led to an especially deep bond.

I have three kids: 22- and 16- year old daughters and a 19-year old son. My fiancé is essentially their step-father. He has developed a close relationship with them over the phone.

My fiancé and I have gone through serious ups and downs together, and our phone calls have covered all of it. On the silly side, he often accompanies me and my kids on our road trips up to OSP over the phone. Being the terrible comedian he is, he loves to pull pranks such as trying to order food for himself over speakerphone when we're in the Taco-Bell drive-through, or instructing my kids to ask for help finding embarrassing items for me when we're in the store. I can't stand these antics but my kids absolutely love them. On a more serious note, it has been over the phone that I have been able to share with my fiancé joyful life moments such as the graduations of my kids. We have also used our phone calls to share and process extremely hard news. It was over the phone last year that I had to break it to him that his sister passed away in a car crash. And six months later, it was once again over the phone that I had to let him know his grandmother passed away. Over the course of our phone calls, he opened up to me about what his sister and grandmother meant to him and I helped him process his emotions around their deaths.

I can't imagine what it would be like if we hadn't been able to talk about these things over the phone. Being stuck in a cell, it is especially easy for my fiancé to get stuck in his head. His biggest fear is being separated from his loved ones and then having them pass away, like his sister and grandmother. So staying connected with his loved ones, and feeling like they are still a part of each other's lives, is vital for his mental well-being. And staying in touch with him is vital for mine.

The cost of phone calls is beyond stressful financially. With the amount of time we talk, I routinely spend \$200 per month on phone calls. On top of that, many of my fiancé's family members, some of whom are on disability, cannot afford phone calls, so I also send him money to call them. And I also add money to my kids' accounts so they can speak with him as well. I am on a fixed income and one of my kids is disabled. I already struggle to cover the costs of my

mortgage, bills, food, and providing for my children. At times, I have had to rely on credit cards to make ends meet. Paying for phone calls on top of all that is extremely hard. It is a major financial burden and cause of stress, and it directly takes away from my ability to meet all those other needs.

I pray that Oregon lawmakers approve HB 3118. People need this. It is not just my family. It is everybody. Especially people with family members on fixed incomes. It really would be a godsend for prison phone calls to be free.

Sincerely,

Natalie Belles
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