Dear Oregon legislators,

My name is Mary Kennedy, and my great-nephew is incarcerated at Oregon State Penitentiary. I live in Longview, Washington, which is about two hours away. However, because of my health issues, I've only been able to visit him once. The only way we stay in touch is over the phone. He calls me two to three times per week. Before he left for Virginia, where he got caught up in these legal troubles, he lived with me and my mother. It was nice to have face to face contact with him every day. When he moved, it felt like we lost something. Our phone calls have helped us reconnect.

I put between $30 and $60 on my great-nephew's account each month. He uses those funds to call me as well as other family members, including his mother and brother. I am happy for him to be able to stay in touch with his other family members, and I know that without my contributions, that would be more difficult. His brother lost his job, and his mother doesn't have a lot financially, so my contributions help him stay connected with them.

Still, it is difficult for me. I am on disability and only receive so much per month. Sometimes, by the end of the month, I don't have enough money left to send him. I do my best to set aside money for him, but it often means sacrificing spending on other needs. If phone calls were free, it would drastically change our lives. It would allow my great-nephew to call his family more often. And it would allow me to use the money for other necessities.

Beyond our family, free phone calls would also give more inmates the opportunity to stay in contact with their families. My great-nephew has mentioned that some of his fellow inmates never get to talk to their loved ones, and whatever the cause of that, I believe free phone calls would make it easier for them. Family ties are very important for mental health, and it helps people who are incarcerated as well as their family members on the outside to know that there are people who love and support them.

Sincerely,

Mary Kennedy
Longview, WA