

Dear Oregon legislators,

My name is Donita Ogletree and I am writing to express my support for HB 3118. I share this testimony based on a lifetime of experience working to maintain relationships with people through prison bars. My first experience with a family member in DOC custody was when I was fifteen years old. Between 2002 and 2004, I spent two years in prison myself. And I now stay in touch with my son, who has been incarcerated at OSP for the last ten years.

I know firsthand how heartbreaking it is to be separated from your loved ones while incarcerated. Out of the five children I had at that time, I was only able to see or call one of them during the entire two years I spent incarcerated, and we were only able to see each other a few times at that. There were multiple reasons for this; my relationships with my children and family members were complicated, as I struggled heavily with addiction prior to my incarceration, leading me to place my children with family. But even during that time, I was able to call and visit them at the homes of my family members who took them in. Although I would have loved to remain in contact with them throughout my incarceration, that did not occur, and one of the primary reasons for that was the cost. I was indigent for the majority of my incarceration, and the family members responsible for my children were also under a lot of financial strain. It is hard to describe how miserable that experience was. I missed my kids every day. I cried every day. It was so painful to not have any idea what was happening in their lives. I felt like I had abandoned them. Embracing my kids on the day I got out, with one wrapped around my legs and another in my arms, still stands out to me as one of the greatest moments of my life. I remember feeling so glad in that moment that I had not given up and committed suicide while incarcerated, which I had frequently contemplated. I believe that if I had been able to hear my kids' voices while incarcerated, it would have been a lot easier to get through that time.

Now, as I mentioned, my son is incarcerated. I am not able to visit him in person, so the phone is our only way of staying in touch. For many years, we talked almost daily, although lately, due to a combination of factors, we have only been able to speak once every couple weeks. We speak about everything. He tells me about how his life is going, what initiatives and programs he is leading, and what his goals are. He asks me how I am doing and how my personal progress is going in terms of changing my own behaviors. We spent a period of time working through a book to improve our relationship, reading chapters separately and then discussing them over the phone. I often put him on the phone with his little brother, who considers him both a cautionary example as well as, in many ways, an inspiring role model. Recently, he called me while I was helping his little brother raise money for a class trip at school. He was incredibly excited to hear that, as my criminal record always prevented me from participating in my older children's school lives, and he knew how much effort I put into gaining the ability to volunteer.

While my son's experience in prison has of course involved many negative aspects, he is the first to admit that, in retrospect, prison saved his life. He has grown in incredible ways over the last ten years, earning college degrees and professional licenses, as well as taking on a leadership role organizing programs within the prison. Without the ability to communicate with his supporters throughout his journey, I don't know if my son would be in the position he is in. It has done him enormous amounts of good to be able to speak with his friends and family, to be reminded that he is loved, and to know he is not being forgotten or abandoned. He has recently discovered a whole new side of life after establishing a relationship with his dad's side of the family, whom he was estranged from before entering prison. I believe his ability to maintain and build these relationships has done wonders for him. In a way, our support has helped him build such a meaningful and busy life in prison that he is now actually less dependent on us.

The ability to stay connected with loved ones benefits not only inmates but also their families. In some ways, I think it does us more good than them. The time period surrounding my son's conviction was very hard for me as a mother. Within just three months, I had to say goodbye to my three oldest sons — two deployed to Afghanistan, and the third sentenced to fifteen years in prison. I still find myself consumed with worry sometimes, especially with the knowledge of how dangerous prison can be. It has been extremely important for me to be able to check in on my son and know that he is okay.

Phone calls have been very money-consuming over the years. I have spent thousands of dollars to stay in touch with my son. However, right now, I have zero income. Without my Section 8 housing, my youngest son and I would be homeless. I am not able to pay for any communication. I do not even have enough money to send him a text message. Thankfully, my son has been able to pay for phone calls with his own income as well as contributions from his family members and friends. Still, his funds are limited. The decrease in how often we have been calling lately is not purely due to finances, but they have certainly played a role. If phone calls were free, I would like to speak with him at least once per week.

Incarcerated people must have the ability to communicate with their loved ones. They simply must. When you are incarcerated, it already feels like everyone has given up on you. It already feels like there are so many reasons to give up on yourself. This is all the more true when you can't communicate with your loved ones. There are a lot of inmates who can't afford to contact their families at all. When we take these simple little things away, which are sometimes the only things inmates have to look forward to, it takes away their will to live. If we are concerned about mental health and recidivism, we should think about the effect this has on inmates. It makes them more frustrated, more depressed, and more inclined to turn towards unhealthy coping mechanisms. That is the effect it had on me when I was incarcerated. On the other hand, hearing your loved one say they are waiting for you and love you renews your will to keep going. It makes you want to rehabilitate, to do programs, and to get out. And phone calls

are all the more important now that mail and greeting cards have been restricted. A person may agree with the benefits of communication but wonder why an inmate or their family member on the outside can't just set aside a small portion of their income for phone calls; that person does not know what it is like to truly struggle. People out here are struggling to survive. Offering free phone calls, or at least a few free phone calls per week, cannot cost the state too much, and there is no telling how many lives, recoveries, and relationships it could save in the long run.

Sincerely,

Donita Ogletree  
Springfield, OR