

Dear Oregon legislators,

My name is Bernadette Williams and I am writing in support of HB 3118. My son has spent a large portion of the past twenty years in prison. Most recently, he has been at OSP for the past three years. I live in White Salmon, Washington, which is about two hours away. At best, I'm able to visit him about once per month. When he was at Snake River, I was only able to visit him once over the course of six months. In addition to the occasional video visit, the phone is essentially our only way of communicating with each other. We talk on the phone every couple days.

Our ability to talk over the phone has been absolutely essential for our relationship. I love hearing about the accomplishments he is proud of, and the things he is excited about, such as an upcoming job interview in the barber program. It was over the phone that he recently asked me, for the first time ever, to send him a bible. Most importantly, I am someone he can share his emotions with who does not judge him for what he is dealing with. At multiple points while incarcerated over the past twenty years, my son reached a place mentally where he did not want to remain on this plane of existence because of the depths of his struggles. The ability to speak with one another, and for me to offer him love and encouragement, gave him the strength to face another day. If we had not been able to speak over the phone during those times, I am almost certain he would not be alive right now.

Fortunately, my family is in a place financially where the cost of phone calls has not been an issue at all. Compared to staying in touch with my son, it has not even been a thought in my mind. However, I know a lot of people within the system, including my son's girlfriend and other friends, who it does pose an extreme hardship for. I often put money on their accounts so that they can call their own families and friends. A large proportion of the population — larger than many of us are comfortable accepting — have a tough time affording food, let alone phone calls. And that is all the more true when it comes to incarcerated people and their families. For incarcerated people, connections to the outside are a lifeline and can sometimes be the determining factor when it comes to success after release. For people like my son, these connections can be the very reason they stay alive. Anything the State can do to keep families connected would change the lives of so many people.

Sincerely,

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