

Dear Oregon legislators,

My name is Chelsey Rosales and I live in Portland with my two-year old daughter. Her father, my husband, has been incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary for two years. Staying connected as a family is our top priority. In addition to visiting him in person every week and meeting over video twice a week, I talk to him on the phone every day. Phone calls are the primary way we stay in touch.

Our first topic of conversation on every phone call is always how our daughter is doing. In fact, he was somehow able to call me half an hour before I gave birth to our daughter. At the time, I was alone, terrified, and desperate to hear his voice. Although he was nervous too, he shared only encouragement and love, telling me how strong I was and reassuring me that I could do it. His voice gave me the strength I needed. Now, every time I put him on speakerphone, our daughter excitedly shouts “Dada, Dada!” That, along with in-person visits and video calls, is the way she knows him as a parent in her life.

Phone calls also allow us to share support in navigating our often challenging lives. I work full time, while also raising our daughter on a single income. He is doing everything he can in prison, working, going to school, and participating in numerous programs and clubs. Especially on hard days, we both rely on the other for encouragement to hold onto hope and to keep working towards the future we want to build. As just one example of the kind of support we provide each other, he was recently tasked with putting together a speech for Toastmasters. We spent a long time discussing it over the phone, figuring out together what the focus of the speech should be and how to structure it. He decided to focus on the subject of mental health — and he won the competition!

We also use our daily phone calls to strengthen our relationship. We are currently making our way through a marriage book. Each week, we read the same chapter separately and then discuss the questions and emotions it brought up over the phone. In a way, now that all we can do is reflect and talk, it is the perfect time for us to strengthen our relationship. We use these conversations to identify the changes we each need to make within ourselves and for each other. We also discuss our plans for the future, ranging from where he will eat on his first day out, to important life matters involving our aspirations for our family and our professions. These conversations are crucial for him to refocus his mind from his cell to the future he’s going to come home to. If we did not have the ability to talk daily over the phone, I honestly don’t know if we would still have a relationship.

It has also been critical to be able to reach my husband during emergencies. For instance, our daughter recently fell very ill from RSV. Thankfully, she has recovered. But in those kinds of situations, as her father, it is critical for my husband to be aware of what is going on and to have

the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Another time, I was hospitalized and unable to take care of our daughter. I needed to convey care instructions to my mother-in-law, but she only understands Spanish, which I can't speak. Thankfully, my husband was able to call me and learn what was going on, and then get in touch with his mother to convey what was needed in terms of care for our daughter. I cannot imagine how I would navigate those kinds of situations if we could not afford to call each other.

I make phone calls a priority, forming a budget and setting aside money for phone calls each month. My husband also devotes a large proportion of his small income towards phone calls. Thankfully, when my husband is out of funds, I am usually able to fill the gap with my own money. Between the two of us, splitting it roughly 50/50, phone and video calls cost about \$100 per month. However, while raising a child on a single income, spending \$50 on phone calls per month is always a financial burden and stressor. I have spent more than \$1,000 on phone and video calls over the last two years. I would like to put that money towards other crucial needs such as our daughter.

For my husband's mother and sisters, paying for phone calls is more than just a burden. It is often impossible. They are currently facing eviction and have almost no money to spend on calls. While I am blessed to usually be able to cover the cost when my husband runs out of funds, his other family members are unable to do so when that happens, forcing them to go without talking, sometimes for weeks at a time. It is heartbreaking to watch them have to choose between paying to hear their family member's voice or paying their bills. My husband also often has to choose between paying to hear his mother's voice or paying for necessities like food, clothes, and hygiene products from the commissary.

It has not been easy managing financially after losing my husband's income and raising our daughter on my own. I have been fortunate to be able to manage so far. But there are many families who go through these kinds of situations who aren't able to manage financially, like my husband's mother and sisters, and that splits families up. It's devastating to think that relationships fall apart because the people involved can't afford to stay in touch. Making prison phone calls free by approving HB 3118 will benefit all of us.

Sincerely,

Chelsey Rosales
Portland, OR
(971) 732-4617