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ADVOCATES APPLAUD U.S. REPRESENTATIVE RUSH ON THE INTRODUCTION OF LEGISLATION TO CAP THE COST OF PHONE CALLS FOR INCARCERATED PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

*Families have been forced to pay up to \$25 for 15-minute phone call, even during
COVID-19 outbreak*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Last Thursday, U.S. Representative Bobby L. Rush introduced H.R. 6389, The Martha Wright Prison Phone Justice Act, to cap the cost of calls for incarcerated people and to restore the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) authority to regulate the prison telecom industry. If passed, this law will be a significant step towards ending the exploitation of families of incarcerated people by prison telecom corporations.

Representative Rush's bill caps the cost of all calls at \$0.04 per minute for prepaid calls and \$0.05 per minute for collect calls and prohibits unapproved fees and charges. It also ends site commissions, ensuring that correctional agencies do not use incarcerated people to generate revenue. And the bill restores authority to the FCC to regulate both interstate and in-state calls, after a federal appeals court held in 2016 that the FCC did not have authority to cap the cost of in-state calls. The bill is named after Ms. Martha Wright-Reed, who campaigned for decades to lower the cost of calls for incarcerated people and their families.

This legislation is even more significant in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has led prisons and jails to end visits. Without visits, many incarcerated people are isolated from their families by the high cost of phone calls, video calls, and emails. These exorbitant rates will lead to serious consequences for public health. Incarcerated people and their families who are unable to afford the cost of calls will suffer from isolation and stress, which have been proven to weaken immune systems and increase susceptibility to infections. Most importantly, humanity requires that families be able to connect in these trying and tragic times.

But, even under normal conditions, families struggle to stay connected. For years, correctional telecom corporations have charged families as much as \$25 for a 15-minute call. In fact, nearly one third of families with incarcerated loved ones goes into debt trying to stay connected, and 87% of those carrying the burden of these costs are women—largely women of color. This must end now.

Bianca Tylek, Executive Director of Worth Rises, said, “The Martha Wright Prison Phone Justice Act will lead to immediate relief for families across the country that are struggling to pay for simple phone calls with their incarcerated loved ones. For too long, the prison telecom industry has exploited the need for human connection and forced families to choose between paying their rent and paying their phone bill. This bill must be passed by Congress immediately to ensure that our families can stay connected.”

The United Church of Christ’s Media Justice Ministry, OC Inc.’s Chair, Earl Williams, Jr., said, "Congratulations to Representative Rush. We urge the House Energy & Commerce Committee to quickly hold hearings and move to markup on this critical legislation. This bill, along with Senator Duckworth's bi-partisan bill in the Senate, increases the hope of incarcerated people and their families that they will finally gain the same consumer protections as all people in the U.S."

Cheryl A. Leanza, OC Inc.'s Policy Advisor, said, "In this time when so many families, clergy, and friends are not permitted to visit their incarcerated loved ones during the COVID-19 epidemic, just and reasonable rates to communicate are more important than ever. Incarcerated people are facing crowded conditions and potentially insufficient health care. Without communication with the outside, it is impossible to monitor their safety."

Leo Fitzpatrick, Policy Counsel at Free Press Action, said, “Free Press Action welcomes the introduction of the Martha Wright Prison Phone Justice Act by Representative Rush and urges Congress to pass it swiftly—as well as Senator Duckworth’s similar bill in the Senate. Representative Rush’s legislation will clarify regulatory authority, set caps, and bar other exploitative practices. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and laid bare in the starkest terms the challenges already facing so many families: the for-profit, prison industrial complex will continue to exploit people and this cruelty won’t stop until Congress and the FCC take action.”

Dr. Artika R. Tyner, Law Professor and Director at University of St. Thomas Center on Race, Leadership, and Social Justice, said, “Prison phone calls serve as a lifeline for prisoners and their families. Unfortunately, the exorbitant cost of these calls (which is fueled by commissions and profits) limit the ability for families to remain connected. With the novel coronavirus pandemic, now—more than ever is the time to ensure critical communication between family members and their incarcerated loved ones by supporting fair, just, and reasonable prison phone call rates.”

Kay Perry, who coordinated National CURE's Equitable Telephone Charges (eTc) Campaign since the late 1990s, noted, "Incarcerated people and their loved ones have paid exorbitant rates for telephone calls for years. There has never been any justification. Phone companies did it because they could and prisons and jails accepted commissions because they could. This bill will force telecom companies and law enforcement leaders to treat incarcerated persons and their families with the respect due any customer. We do hope that Congress will follow Representative Rush's lead and pass this bill expeditiously."

Elizabeth Matos, Executive Director of Prisoners' Legal Services of Massachusetts, where there is active litigation and legislation to end exorbitant prison phone rates, said, "In Massachusetts, families paid an estimated \$24 million to phone companies and prisons in just one year. This has always been unconscionable, but now, more than ever, we must stop this price gouging of families who are already struggling with so much, and who mostly bear the burden of supporting their loved ones inside and upon reentry."

Steven Renderos, Executive Director of MediaJustice, said, "It is apt that Representative Bobby Rush's legislation is named after Mrs. Martha Wright, who spent decades fighting against the greed of predatory prison phone companies. While she is no longer with us, her memory lives on in the millions of families who daily struggle to stay in touch with their incarcerated loved ones. We urge Congress to demonstrate leadership, especially in the midst of a pandemic, and pass the Martha Wright Prison Phone Justice Act."

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[Worth Rises](#) is a national advocacy organization dedicated to dismantling the prison industry and eliminating the exploitation of those it touches.