

Safe & Just
Michigan

Rep. Yancey Bill Would Eliminate Phone Fees in Michigan Prisons and Jails

Proposal encourages stable families, reduces recidivism

LANSING — State Rep. **Tenisha Yancey** (D-Harper Woods) has introduced a bill that would fully eliminate the fees and charges friends and families of incarcerated people pay to speak with their loved ones inside state prisons and county jails, potentially saving Michigan families tens of millions of dollars annually. In addition, eliminating the cost of phone calls would encourage families to stay engaged with their loved ones who are in jail or prison, which is proven to correlate to a higher likelihood of success when they return home and a lower chance of recidivism.

“Families can have five phone lines for \$300 a month in this day and age, yet our prison systems are still so behind the times,” state Rep. Yancey said. “My bill would help update the prison system by eliminating Michigan Department of Corrections phone fees. Prison phone rates are astronomical, and it places a huge burden on families and friends trying to reach the people they care about. I introduced this bill so that families can connect with their loved ones who are in jail. Studies have shown that staying engaged with family members reduces the chance of recidivism once citizens return home. Plus, allowing families to connect is simply the humane thing to do.”

Michigan families with incarcerated loved ones have historically paid some of the highest phone costs in the nation. A [2019 study from the Prison Policy Initiative](#) found that Michigan jails had some of the highest phone call costs in the nation. Jail phone fees vary by county, and in 2019, Roscommon County was the most expensive county in the state at \$22.56 for a 15-minute call. Only one state — Arkansas — had a county with a higher phone call rate. Phone call rates in Michigan prisons tended to be lower, at \$2.40 for 15 minutes, but that was still expensive enough to tie Michigan as the 12th most-expensive in the nation along with Tennessee, Oregon and Georgia.

The Michigan Legislature took a step toward addressing the high cost of phone calls from Michigan jails and prisons in the recent budget signed in July by Gov. **Gretchen Whitmer**. The

budget eliminated a “special equipment fund” surcharge that will reduce prison phone calls by about \$11 million annually — however, that didn’t lower the cost of phone calls from county jails.

Rep. Yancey’s bill would guarantee that people incarcerated in Michigan jails, prisons or juvenile facilities would be able to call friends and family at no charge to themselves or the person receiving the call. The bill also ensures that a certain number of phones are available per people incarcerated or per housing unit; guaranteeing that people be able to use the phone for two hours a day; and that access to calls won’t interfere with rehabilitative, educational or vocational programming, or with regular facility operations.

“At a time when record inflation is making many families decide between gasoline or food on the table, the last thing they should have to cut out of their budget is keeping in touch with mom or dad,” said Safe & Just Michigan Senior Policy Analyst **Josh Hoe**. “Repeated studies show that people who have kept close ties to their families are more likely to thrive when they come home from jail or prison — but staying close with family is hard to do when you can’t afford to talk with each other.”

Some of the studies showing the benefits of phone contact during incarceration for both the incarcerated and their family members include a [2014 study](#) that found that incarcerated women who had any phone calls with family were “significantly less likely to be reincarcerated within five years post release than women who did not report family phone contact.” A [2020 study](#) concluded that “among children who have contact with their parent via phone, those who do some (sic) on a weekly basis have better relationships with their parents, compared to those who contact their parents via phone less frequently.”

“Being smart on crime means remembering the goals of the corrections system — such as rehabilitation, reducing harm and reintegration — when setting corrections policy,” Hoe said. “Encouraging families to remain connected to their loved ones during incarceration promotes these goals, making Michigan safer for all of us. Reducing phone fees is a wise investment in Michigan communities.”

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Safe & Just Michigan (www.safeandjustmi.org) works to advance policies that end Michigan’s over-use of incarceration and promote community safety and healing. We partner with Michigan organizations and leaders from across the political spectrum, including business and community leaders, faith communities, crime survivor organizations, formerly incarcerated individuals, prisoners and their families, as well as Michigan taxpayers statewide.