Judiciary Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6714
Title: AN ACT CONCERNING THE COST OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICES IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES.
Vote Date: 4/9/2019
Vote Action: Joint Favorable
PH Date: 3/25/2019
File No.: 776

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SPONSORS OF BILL:
Judiciary Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:
This bill would provide free phone services to individuals in Connecticut prisons. In offering such services, the financial burden placed on families during incarceration would be decreased.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

State of Connecticut Criminal Justice Information System (CJIS): CJIS does not have a position on this bill. However, it would affect funding for the Connecticut Information Sharing System (CISS), a data collection system created by CJIS to improve public safety and promote efficiency in judicial processes. In fiscal year 2020, CJIS anticipates $5.1 million in revenue that will be utilized for staffing and other aspects related to CISS. If this policy is implemented, there will be a significant loss of revenue that will impact the maintenance of CISS. Consequently, this would hinder the spread of information that could be utilized to reduce incarceration rates.

State of Connecticut Judicial Branch: The Judicial Branch does not have a position on this bill; however, the policy would impact the funding of various Adult Probation programs. In fiscal year 2018, the Judicial Branch received $5.5 million in revenue that was allocated to the Probation Transition Program and the Technical Violations Unit. HB 6714 would lead to a loss of revenue that would impact staffing levels and the criminal justice community as a whole.
NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Keith Powers, Chair of the Criminal Justice Committee, New York City Council: Last year, the Criminal Justice Committee of the New York City Council enacted legislation that made phone calls free for individuals in City jails. Studies have shown that incarcerated individuals who maintain contact with their families are less likely to reoffend. Implementing this policy would support the growing focus on reform and rehabilitation in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, it would facilitate positive reintegration of incarcerated individuals back into their communities. On Rikers Island in New York City, 26,000 calls are made daily. Previously, these calls generated over $5 million in revenue. Enacting this policy would address financial inequities that exist in the criminal justice system.

Alexi Jones, Policy Analyst, Prison Policy Initiative: Connecticut prisons charge more for phone calls than any other state except Arkansas, with each call costing approximately five times more than those in Rhode Island or New York. High costs may deter incarcerated individuals from contacting their families and friends who serve as a critical support system during incarceration. Studies show that individuals who maintain contact with their loved ones are less likely to reoffend. Overall, current policy places a significant financial burden on low-income families.

Brittany Kane, Program Coordinator, CT Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative (CTCTIP): Connecticut ranks 49th in affordability of fifteen-minute prison phone calls. Currently, the state earns 68% commission on these calls, which amounted to $7,707,465.27 in fiscal year 2018. Incarceration significantly impacts familial relationships, and maintaining contact with family and loved ones reduces the rate of recidivism and helps to alleviate trauma and stress for the family. When a parent is incarcerated, the family’s income is greatly impacted. Charging for phone calls adds a financial burden to struggling families.

Joanna Weiss, Co-Director, Fines and Fees Justice Center: The rates of incarceration have increased over the last thirty years and as a result, low income families and “communities of color” have been financially impacted. The financial burden associated with phone call rates often augments racial disparities and poverty. Increased fees also impact public safety. Maintaining communication with loved ones during incarceration is critical to successful re-entry and lower recidivism rates. If phone calls are too expensive, that could impact an individual’s transition back into society. There is a growing movement across the United States to reduce fees associated with judicial processes and Connecticut should follow suit in improving the justice system.

Brian Highsmith, Skadden Fellow, National Consumer Law Center: The high cost of calls out of prisons places a burden on families at a time when it is critical to stay connected. Mr. Highsmith cited examples of several clients who rely on telephone communication to contact their families. However, due to the cost, many families are forced to choose between phone calls and basic necessities. Research has shown that maintaining communication with family and friends during incarceration reduces the rate of recidivism. Previously, prisoners could choose their phone providers and rates; however once that changed, prices significantly increased in the form of call rates and hidden account fees. These fees significantly impact low income families and people of color, and reflect some of the issues that exist in the current legal system.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None submitted.

Reported by: Meagan Schantz  Date: 5/3/2019