

Worth Rises: Milwaukee takes a step toward prison phone justice, stopping short of a guaranteeing free calls in jail

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MILWAUKEE, WI — Today, the Milwaukee Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to pass a resolution, as amended, to provide “free or ultra low cost” voice and video calls in the county’s jail and house of correction. The original resolution would have made voice and video calls free this year. The amendment, which passed 12-5, requires county administrators to report back to the Board by July 2022 with a plan to RFI and subsequently RFP jail telecom services with the intention of making voice and video calls “free or ultra low cost.” Advocates are disappointed that the Board punted the urgent need for free jail communication, but resolve to continue putting pressure on the Board to get to fully free voice and video calls in the near-term.

“The list of cities, counties, and states committed to connecting families with free prison and jail communication grows every day, and we were hoping to add Milwaukee to that list today. Unfortunately, the Milwaukee Board of Supervisors has yet fully recognized the harm it is causing in conspiring with the predatory prison telecom industry to extract resources from its most marginalized communities,” said **Bianca Tylek, Executive Director of Worth Rises**. “This campaign to separate families started ten years ago when Milwaukee ended visits to force the use of costly communication services. We hoped it would end today, but it looks like there is still work to do to bring Milwaukee in alignment with other leaders in prison phone justice. We will continue that work with Supervisor Ryan Clancy, a remarkable champion on the issue, and all of our local partners. Jail calls will be free in Milwaukee.”

New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, Louisville, and Connecticut, have all made phone calls, and in some cases other communications services, free in their jails and prisons. Together these policies have saved directly impacted families over tens of million annually and connected thousands.

“In an act of cruelty and an effort to pad the Sheriff’s budget, Milwaukee County banned visitation a decade ago in our jail and House of Correction. That decision cost families more than the \$5.1 million dollars a year when we forced them to pay for phone and video calls. It’s impossible to quantify the damage and trauma that this extortion has caused,” said **Ryan Clancy, 4th District Milwaukee County Supervisor**. “For ten years, we have forced families into impossible choices, often making them choose between paying rent or trying to maintain contact with their loved ones, which is so important to the well-being of their families and key to successful reentry after release. This amended resolution does not reflect the urgency of the situation, but is an important first step towards reducing the harm we have caused. This progress would not have been possible without deep support from the community, most importantly from individuals and families who are directly impacted by this policy and who shared – in committee, in petitions, and to their Supervisors – their compelling stories. I am grateful, too, for the fierce advocacy of Worth Rises, EXPO (Ex-Prisoners Organizing), The Community, Milwaukee DSA, and AbolishMKE. We will need those same voices – and more – to shepherd this legislation into actual action in the months to come.”

“The connection with family is paramount to a successful transition to the community and the reduction of chronic stress that can cause bad health outcomes. Often this cost causes hardships to those who are already struggling to make ends meet. It was my hope that Milwaukee County would do what is good and right for its citizens and stop the extortion of some of its most vulnerable people. We must invest in people and families. This investment would mean so much to so many families in Milwaukee County,” said **Jerome Dillard, Director of EX-incarcerated People Organizing (EXPO)**. “It is crucial that sons and daughters and mothers and fathers maintain their connections during these critical times of separation. That connection requires the ability to phone home without causing hardship.”

“We aren’t going anywhere on this issue and the evidence of its importance to building stronger communities is only getting louder. We can’t postpone or punish our way to a solution. The question of pricing on phone call costs for incarcerated people is not about the budget or what taxpayers should pay for. It is a matter of investments and outcomes,” said **Shannon Ross, Executive Director of The**

Community. “When we invest in facilitating communication between incarcerated parents and their children or just incarcerated people and their often struggling support network beyond the fence, we are investing in responding wisely to bad situations and getting the best outcomes for families and communities everywhere.”

If you are covering this story and would like to speak to Bianca Tylek or another advocate involved in the fight for free jail calls in Milwaukee, please contact Taylor Campbell at (347) 804-9001 or tcampbell@worthrises.org.