



March 24, 2025

The Honorable Mohamud Noor
Co-Chair, Human Services Finance and Policy Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
5th Floor, Centennial Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

The Honorable Joe Schomacker
Co-Chair, Human Services Finance and Policy Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
2nd Floor, Centennial Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Re: Legal Aid/Minnesota Disability Law Center Support for HF 1861

Dear Co-Chair Noor, Co-Chair Schomacker, and Members of the Committee:

Legal Aid and the Minnesota Disability Law Center (MDLC) thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony and support for HF 1861. Legal Aid represents clients in poverty, clients who are 60 and older, and clients with disabilities free of charge. We represent most clients with disabilities through MDLC, which is also the federally designated Protection and Advocacy agency for people with disabilities in the state of Minnesota.

The reasons for making phone calls free for incarcerated individuals also apply to making communication services available to adult and juvenile Minnesotans in state facilities. Maintaining one's support network of family and community is crucial to the success of those residing in mental and physical health facilities, especially when placement is not available near one's home.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding HF 1861. We urge you to support this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Purrington", written in a cursive style.

Jennifer Purrington
Legal Director/Deputy Director
Minnesota Disability Law Center

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ellen Smart", written in a cursive style.

Ellen Smart
Staff Attorney
Legal Services Advocacy Project

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Testimony in Support of HF 1861 to Provide Free Communication to People Incarcerated in Minnesota Prisons and Their Families

March 26, 2025

Dear Chair Noor, Chair Schomacker and the House Human Services Finance and Policy Committees,

My name is Antonya Jeffrey, and I am the Director of Policy Campaigns and Government Affairs at Worth Rises, a national non-profit dedicated to ending the exploitation of people impacted by incarceration. I am here today in **strong support of HF 1861**. Minnesota made significant strides in 2023 by making phone calls free for incarcerated people and their loved ones. **HF 1861 builds on that success by extending free communication to include video calls and electronic messaging, ensuring that incarcerated individuals can maintain meaningful connections with their families.**

Thank you for taking the time to hear testimony regarding this important legislation, and thank you to Rep. Agbaje for sponsoring this bill. I hope you will take special note of the powerful stories shared by those directly impacted by incarceration and the burdens imposed by the exorbitant cost of prison communication. I will instead focus my testimony on the policy arguments and fiscal considerations that support this legislation.

Worth Rises has helped jurisdictions across the country pass similar policies to provide free communications for incarcerated people and their support networks. We led the first successful state campaign in Connecticut and additional state campaigns in California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and here in Minnesota. We also led or supported successful local campaigns in New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, and Miami. Accordingly, we know what it takes to implement this policy and are committed to helping Minnesota take the next step in making communications free.

Based on our analysis, we project that expanding free communications to include video calls and electronic messaging would cost the state as little as roughly \$750,000 annually. We base our estimate on known rates charged by leading vendors around the country, which in many cases are much lower than rates charged in Minnesota, and usage rates in jurisdictions with free communication.

¹ Federal Communications Commission. (n.d.). Incarcerated People's Communications Services. <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/incarcerated-peoples-communications-services>

Notably, in Minnesota, video calls are charged at \$0.23 per minute, which new Federal Communications Commission regulations will require be cut by more than half.¹ However, more importantly, there are more competitive rates offered by all the leading prison telecom providers. For example, in Arizona, video calls cost \$0.03 per minute. Similarly, while Minnesota families pay \$0.40 per stamp to send an electronic message, families in California pay \$0.03 per message and, in other states, they pay even less. Please note that there are always new compensation models rolling out that could further lower the cost. Should the DOC provide additional information, we can furnish more precise cost projections and a detailed analysis of FCC implementation requirements.

Video calls and electronic messaging are important tools for maintaining family bonds under the strain of incarceration. Most incarcerated individuals are housed over 100 miles from home, making regular visits financially and logistically difficult, especially for children.² Video calls help bridge the painful gaps between visits, allowing families to see each other's faces, share school projects, and experience everyday moments that sustain relationships. Similarly, electronic messaging offers a flexible way to stay connected when phone calls are hard to coordinate. Unlike calls, which often do not allow for voicemails, electronic messaging provides a reliable way to share updates, offer emotional support, and help with reentry planning outside of hard to schedule real-time communications, ensuring that family ties remain strong despite physical separation. Electronic messaging is also particularly important to a younger generation that is more familiar with digital communications.

Family support can change how successful a person is both during and after their incarceration. It increases hope, reduces desperation, and encourages positive behavior, which in turn, reduces violence and improves the correctional environment for incarcerated people and corrections officers alike.³ This translates into improved reentry outcomes, lower recidivism, and increased public safety. Decreasing barriers to accessing critical communications like video calls and electronic messaging would only bolster the rehabilitative efforts of the Department of Corrections.

In closing, we ask that you vote yes on HF 1861. Thank you for your consideration, and please do not hesitate to reach out with questions at ajeffer@worthrises.org.

Sincerely,



Antonya Jeffrey
Director of Policy Campaigns and Government Affairs
Worth Rises

² Sawyer, W., & Bertram, W. (2018). "Separation by Bars and Miles." Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/prisonvisits.html>

³ Wong, Leah. "Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families." Prison Policy Initiative, 2021. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/