



Maine Municipal
Association

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Testimony of the Maine Municipal Association
In Support of
LD 1175– *An Act To Prohibit Excessive Telephone, Video and Commissary
Charges in Maine Jails and Prisons*

April 14, 2021

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, my name is Rebecca Graham, and I am providing testimony in support of LD 1175, on behalf of the Maine Municipal Association and at the direction of our 70-member Legislative Policy Committee.

In 2019, MMA submitted testimony on an in-person visitation bill that emphasized the municipal view that maintaining family connections while incarcerated played a significant role in recidivism. Local officials were disturbed by the trend to move away from in-person visits and toward video visits that shift costs to family members, especially since these services are free for each of us through several apps, including the one to hold this public hearing today.

Since then, the Bureau of Justice Assistance's work in evaluating Maine's criminal justice reality uncovered hard data that over 85 % of Maine's inmates are indigent. Municipal officials are deeply uncomfortable with the concept of making a profit on basic communication systems particularly at levels no one outside the system must pay.

Now, the pandemic has made phone and video services the only way in which all of us are staying connected.

Communication between inmates and outside individuals must certainly be monitored to prevent threatening and intimidation of victims or coordination for other criminal activity. However, maintaining relationships are also key to preparing that individual for reentry into the community and to avoid intergenerational harm that is often associated with incarceration.

Municipal officials ask that this committee evaluate the structural reasons county facilities may be placed in a position that they need to supplement their operations through a fee

for communication systems and make such communication costs a part of the formula that calculates inmate costs for operational support. Counties should be supported in providing safe and monitored communication access for inmates without treating such as a luxury or an expense that is not covered under a formula for reimbursement for each individual in a facility.

While this bill is drafted to set a bottom limit which officials support as reasonable, ideally, they would like the committee to solve the structural problem that has created these charges in the first place and fully fund the communication costs for state and county facilities. Without this consideration, and involvement from county officials to understand the true costs of jail communication systems, rates established in legislation could be an unfunded mandate.