

Maine PRISONER ADVOCACY Coalition



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Testimony in support of LD 1175 to the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety April 14, 2021

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and distinguished members of the Committees.

My name is Peter Lehman and I live in Thomaston. I am a formerly incarcerated citizen and a person in long-term recovery.* The goal of the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition is to promote restorative practices to increase public safety and the health of our community.

This bill is about profiteering at the expense of children and families.

Other states and the Federal prison system don't charge for phone calls.

Once upon a time, Maine didn't charge for phone calls. Because the importance of connection is clear in encouraging growth and change. Because the importance of connection is clear in increasing successful reentry. Because the importance of connection is clear in reducing recidivism and reducing costs.

But at some point, the State of Maine discovered that could make a profit from the families and children of incarcerated loved ones. And reduce the state budget and the county budgets. So we did.

We added a profit mark-up to phone calls and to commissary purchases. Mostly this is a tax on the children and families and other loved ones. And not a small one. The markup on phone calls in our prisons is 260% -- they cost the DOC 2.5¢/minute and charge 9¢/minute. **260% mark-up.**

I'm not sure what the commissary mark-up is any is excessive.

* In the interest of honesty and disclosure, a personal background statement is available on request.

Now someone is bound to tell you that these mark-ups don't go into the general budget but into the "Inmate Benefit Fund" that spends money to benefit residents. That's true but it's also a lie.

It's true that the IBF exists. This "benefit fund" goes to things like purchasing basketballs and weights. And these benefit inmates.

The lie is that the DOC would **still** buy basketballs and weights even if phone calls were free or charged at cost. If for no other reason than to maintain their ACA accreditation.

SO the IBF actually subsidizes the government.

It double-taxes families.

It exploits children, like my eleven-year-old daughter who wanted to talk with her dad every week.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.