

Good Morning Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and distinguished members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Ben Martineau. I live in South Portland and I am advocate with Homeless Voices for Justice. Homeless Voices for Justice is a grassroots organization based in Portland, ME, organized by people who have experienced homelessness, with the goal of creating positive policy change to end homelessness and poverty in Maine. I am here on behalf of Homeless Voices for Justice to testify in support of LD 1175.

Many people who are in the criminal justice system have experienced, or are experiencing, poverty. In addition, in our country and throughout our state, homelessness, mental illness, and substance use disorder have all been criminalized and we send people to jail and prisons instead of connecting them to the resources they need. Families are heavily impacted by this criminalization and they end up dealing with a long list of fees, including the ones highlighted in this bill.

I have personally experienced being both an inmate and an inmate's outside support system. In my experience, I was the primary breadwinner in my family. When I went to jail, my family was unable to pay the phone charges, so I was unable to talk to them. Being incarcerated and unable to connect with my family was incredibly difficult, and no incarcerated person should have to experience that.

Now that I am an outside support for someone who is inside, I am the one paying the excessive fees. One example of this is transactions fees. For those who don't know, Securus is the company that handles adding money to inmate's phone accounts. If you have an account with the app on your phone you are charged a one-time \$3.40 transaction fee each time you add money to an inmates' phone account. For example, if I put \$30.00 on an account, the total charge comes out to \$33.40. If you do not have an account, each collect call made would have additional \$3.40

fee. This pay to play system harms inmates, their families, and disproportionately impacts people in poverty, who are also disproportionately represented within jails and prisons.

My own journey has included recovery from alcoholism. Connection is incredibly important to recovery, and the connection I have found within the recovery community has been a huge support in my recovery journey. In normal conditions, there are support groups throughout jails and prison, such as AA or NA. COVID-19 and isolation have taken a huge mental toll on the recovery community with these meetings often canceled, and family visits being limited or suspended. Now more than ever, inmates need accessible ways to communicate with their friends and family. Outside support reduces re-entry.

Lastly, I would like to stress that this bill impacts racial justice. Black people are overrepresented in prisons and jails throughout the United States, including Maine. Data from the Bureau of Justice¹ found that the lifetime likely hood of imprisonment for Black men is 1 in 3 and 1 in 18 in Black women. That is 1 in 3 Black families also being impacted by economic hardship and separation of their family, and 1 in 3 families forced to pay these fees just to keep in touch. When for every dollar a typical white household has, a Black one has only 12 cents, policies like these fees have a disproportionate racial impact.²

Homeless Voices for Justice believes everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. Money or lack of it should not be a barrier to communication between families and access to basic necessities for inmates. I urge you to vote yes on this bill. Thank you.

¹ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/09/business/economy/racial-wealth-gap.html>