

## **ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT**

### **TESTIMONY ON 23 – H 6310, AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT – CORRECTIONS DEPARTMENT May 3, 2023**

The ACLU of RI strongly supports this legislation which would increase the daily wages for incarcerated workers from \$3 per day to \$6 per day. This modest bill sheds a light on the unacknowledged part of the carceral system that imposes enormous costs on incarcerated people both inside the prison and, in terms of costs, fines and fees, when they leave as well – and which places them on a precarious financial footing once they leave the facility.

For an individual facing release, the only financial resources that they may have at their disposal are those which they have earned while incarcerated. Especially with the multitude of financial issues that a formerly incarcerated individual has to contend with – between housing, food, transportation and more – having access to a reasonable amount of saved earnings could be a critical step in promoting community reintegration, ensuring ongoing rehabilitation, and preventing recidivism.

We share the views of the Prison Policy Initiative, which has noted:

People with felony convictions are often ineligible for government benefit programs like welfare and food stamps, and face barriers to finding stable housing and employment. And they may leave prison with just a bus ticket and \$50 of ‘gate money,’ if they have no other savings. So the meager earnings from prison work assignments can be essential to a person’s success – and even survival – when they return to their community.

Most prison jobs teach incarcerated people very few skills relevant to the labor market they will rejoin upon release, so the wages they earn may be the only payoff they see. . . Their success and independence depends largely on financial stability, which is undermined by low wages, nickel-and-diming through “user fees,” mandatory deductions, and work that does little to prepare them for work outside of prisons. Forward-thinking policymakers must consider the importance of earnings and relevant job training for people they hope will be independent one day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/>

However, even before release, the impact of raising the daily wage for incarcerated workers is profound. Just as inflation has impacted all of us, it has also caused a prohibitive increase in price for the commissary items available to incarcerated individuals, even though the cost of commissary items was already financially burdensome for many. This issue is compounded by the importance of commissary items for incarcerated individuals, who “often rely on items purchased from commissaries when the state-issued meals and personal hygiene items fall short,” and especially considering that “people behind bars also pay an additional ‘tax’ on these items...in the form of unregulated markups that tack on as much as 66% of the price.”<sup>2</sup> Combined with the fact that commissary prices have risen as much as 27% in some states<sup>3</sup>, it is clear that the current \$3 per day wage is woefully insufficient to meet the needs that incarcerated individuals have.

Increasing wages for incarcerated individuals is simply good policy which supports personal and financial needs as these individuals rehabilitate and prepare for community reintegration, both inside and outside of the prison environment. For these reasons, we strongly urge support for this modest bill which uplifts equity and takes an important first step in acknowledging and addressing the often-precarious financial positions of justice-involved individuals.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2023/05/02/why-inflation-price-hikes-are-even-worse-behind-bars>

<sup>3</sup> Id.