ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF 24-S 2233,
RELATING TO CORRECTIONS DEPARTMENT
May 9, 2024

The ACLU of Rhode Island strongly supports this bill, which would provide free communications services to people at the ACI and ensure the availability of contact visits. There can be no question that rehabilitation is substantially enhanced by making contact between incarcerated individuals and their loved ones easier.

Almost twenty years ago, the General Assembly was one of the first states in the country to address this issue by tackling what could only be called exorbitant phone rates for incarcerated individuals to call their families. The private carriers that the Department of Corrections contracted with had per-minute-charge rates that were unreasonable, excessive, and extremely burdensome for the often income-stressed families desirous of talking with spouses, siblings and friends who were locked up at the ACI.

In response, Rhode Island took the lead in 2006 by passing a law barring telephone service providers from charging prison calls at a rate different than those for non-prison calls, and prohibiting the state from obtaining any profits from these phone service contracts. This was a very important step forward, and it helped make Rhode Island a leader in reducing excessive phone charges for communication between prisoners and their loved ones.

This bill takes the next step by offering those call services for free to people incarcerated at the ACI and to their families. In doing so, Rhode Island would follow the lead of our neighboring state Connecticut, which recently passed a similar law. Prisoners' families bear the cost, often at significant personal sacrifice, of these calls. Passage of this bill will facilitate contact between prisoners and their families, and help promote rehabilitation.

The ACLU therefore urges the committee's support of this humane bill.