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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF 23-S 406, RELATING TO CORRECTIONS DEPARTMENT March 21, 2023

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 to address this issue by tackling what could only be called exorbitant phone rates for individuals to call their family. 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, this state took the lead by passing a law barring telephone service providers from charging prison calls at any 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.

This bill takes the next step by offering those call services for free to those incarcerated at the ACI and 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, and passage of this bill will facilitate contact between prisoners and their families, and help promote rehabilitation.

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