



COUNCIL OF ELIZABETH FRY SOCIETIES OF ONTARIO

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Government of Ontario

RE: 2020 Budget Consultations

Recommendation to Improve Telecommunications for Prisoners

The Ministry of Solicitor General's contract with Bell Canada to provide telecommunication services for all provincial prisons is up for renewal in July 2020. This presents an opportunity for the government to meaningfully improve a service that is harming the wellbeing and safety of Ontarians. Prisoners and their families report receiving phone bills costing hundreds to thousands of dollars per month. To make matters worse, jail and prison phone calls can only be made to landlines. **The Government of Ontario must commit to securing a contract that ensures cost-free telecommunications for prisoners, eliminates the 20-minute cap on calls and enables direct calls to cell phones and switchboards.**

Access to telephone communication is a lifeline for prisoners, but the current Offender Telephone Management System (OTMS) burdens incarcerated people and their support systems through prohibitive costs and restrictive policies. Long-distance collect calls from prisoners can cost over a dollar per minute in addition to the \$2.50 connection fee. Because provincial prisoners are unable to work to pay for calls, these costs are downloaded onto families and service providers.

Access to telecommunication is crucial for incarcerated people to maintain contact with their families and loved ones, coordinate community re-entry plans, and access external services such as legal counsel, health care, and mental health support.^[1] Without these supports, many incarcerated people experience isolation, disconnection, poverty, and mental health challenges - which can create barriers to community reintegration upon release. Inside prisons, this lack of communication contributes to self-harm, violence, and preventable death.

The Ministry of the Solicitor General recognizes "that communication between [prisoners] and members of the community is important for rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society" and that "the telephone is the primary method by which [prisoners] maintain contact with others."^[2] **The barriers to communication persistent in the current OTMS are counterproductive to the Ministry's stated goal of prisoner rehabilitation and contribute to higher recidivism, costing taxpayers more money in the long run given that the average cost to incarcerate a person in Ontario is \$85,000 per year.**

Though the Ministry of the Solicitor General plans to provide telecommunication services at reduced rates in the 2020 contract, the majority of prisoners would still be unable to afford the Ministry's proposed pay-per-use system. Pay-per-use systems pose significant barriers for prisoners to access justice. While 69 percent of prisoners in Ontario jails are legally innocent until proven guilty or

otherwise,^[3] they are being detained and cut off from their legal supports, compromising their chances to mount a defence and raising serious *Charter* issues.

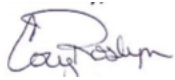
An investment in a prison phone system that prioritizes connection over a short-sighted, erroneous evaluation of cost would benefit prisoners and their families while contributing to community well-being and safety.

Recommendation:

Reform the current prison phone system to ensure cost-free telecommunications for prisoners, the elimination of the twenty-minute cap on phone calls, and the ability to make direct calls to cellphones and switchboards.

Please make this urgent issue a priority in the 2020 budget year!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Cory Roslyn".

Cory Roslyn,
President - Council of Elizabeth Fry Societies of Ontario