

Attn: Treasurer, Mr Tim Pallas, *by email*

Attn: Minister for Corrections, The Hon. Enver Erdogan, *by email*

Attn: Minister for Children, The Hon. Lizzie Blandthorn, *by email*

Sunday, 12 May 2024

Mother's Day

Dear Treasurer and Ministers,

We, the undersigned, represent a range of community, legal, and social services all working with or on behalf of people in prison and their families. We are writing to you today – on Mother's Day – to call on the government to fully fund the cost of making phone calls from prison. We also express our disappointment that, despite recent commitments from the Allan government in response to the Yoorrook Justice Commission,<sup>i</sup> there has been no funding in this year's Budget to subsidise the cost of phone calls from prison. We reiterate our urgent concern, expressed during the Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration,<sup>ii</sup> the Cultural Review of the Adult Custodial Corrections System,<sup>iii</sup> and in sustained and sector-wide advocacy efforts over recent years, at the exorbitant cost of these phone calls. These costs create an unacceptably high barrier to contact between people in prison and their families, including children, and damage people's prospects for successful reintegration into their community post-release.

The cost of a 12-minute phone call (the maximum duration that is allowed) from a Victorian prison to a mobile phone is currently nearly \$7.<sup>iv</sup> This is substantially higher than other states and territories in Australia.<sup>v</sup> People in prison only earn between \$3.55 and \$9.60 per day for the work they do,<sup>vi</sup> and they must budget for items from the canteen and other expenses alongside the high cost of phone calls to their children and families. This means incarcerated parents must either forego communication with their children or rely on families already doing it tough outside to cover the cost. Children have a right to contact with their parents and experience long-term harm without it, so the status quo harms the estimated 7,000 Victorian children with a parent in prison at any one time.<sup>vii</sup> It also contravenes the clear evidence that strong family connection is one of the strongest protective factors against reoffending post-release,<sup>viii</sup> extending that harm to families and communities across the state.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people face unique and compounded experiences of trauma while incarcerated. Remaining connected to one's culture, family, and community can minimise that trauma, thereby reducing the risk of recidivism. Reducing recidivism and getting people out of the quicksand of the legal system helps the individual and has significant community benefits. It is essential in progressing on the path towards self-determination via Treaty and achieving the justice targets under the Closing the Gap agreement.

Governments around the world are moving towards the full funding of prison phone calls under corrective services budgets. In the USA, the states of Connecticut, California, Colorado, and Minnesota, and the cities of San Francisco, New York City, and San Diego, among others, now provide phone calls at no cost to people incarcerated in their prisons and jails.<sup>ix</sup> Victoria could provide policy leadership by being the first state in Australia to follow suit, rather than lagging behind all other states and territories as we currently do. We note that Corrections Victoria's contract with its prison telecommunications provider, Comsec TR, expires in 2025.<sup>x</sup> We urge the government to cease its contract with private providers such as Comsec TR and instead assume the responsibility and cost for

the prison phone system. We note further that Comsec TR also provides prison telecommunications services in Tasmania, where incarcerated people are charged 37% less for phone calls to mobiles than they are in Victoria.<sup>xi</sup> If the contract with Comsec TR continues, we sincerely hope its re-negotiation will result in a substantial decrease and/or subsidisation of the cost of phone calls for people in prison.

We strongly encourage the government to listen to the voices of people with lived experience of the justice system explaining how the prohibitive cost of phone calls impacted their families, affected their wellbeing in prison, and compromised their journey to desistance and reintegration post-release. Many of the signatories to this letter would be able to facilitate meetings with people who have this expertise should the Treasurer or Ministers wish. We also make ourselves available for ongoing consultation on how the government can best promote strong, pro-social connections between people in prison and their families on the outside.

Thank you very much for your time. Please do not hesitate to contact Abigail Lewis, Senior Policy & Advocacy Advisor at Vacro, at [alewis@vacro.org.au](mailto:alewis@vacro.org.au) or 0468 566 218 with any questions or a response to this letter.

Signed,



The Centre  
Centre for Excellence in Child and Family  
Welfare



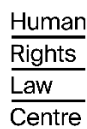
Centre for Innovative Justice



Federation of Community Legal Centres



Flat Out



Human Rights Law Centre



Justice Reform Initiative



Law and Advocacy Centre for Women



Smart Justice for Women



The Torch



Vacro



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service



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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.firstpeoplesrelations.vic.gov.au/victorian-government-response-voorrook-justice-report-april-2024>, p. 32

<sup>ii</sup> See Section 7.3.2 and Recommendation 22 in the Committee's final report, available at <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-children-with-imprisoned-parents/reports>

<sup>iii</sup> See Recommendation 6.3 of the Review's final report, available at <https://www.correctionsreview.vic.gov.au/final-report-safer-prisons-safer-people-safer-communities/>

<sup>iv</sup> See the final report of the Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration, p. 166, available at

[https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/498b38/contentassets/c5301ed866b64611a2a6f4979865e991/lclsic-59-11\\_children-affected-by-parental-incarceration.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/498b38/contentassets/c5301ed866b64611a2a6f4979865e991/lclsic-59-11_children-affected-by-parental-incarceration.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-06/prison-phone-calls-costs-australia/102409868>

<sup>vi</sup> Deputy Commissioner's Instructions, 3.03 Prison Industries, available at <https://www.corrections.vic.gov.au/deputy-commissioners-instructions-programs-and-industry>

<sup>vii</sup> See the Chair's forward, p. xi, <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-children-with-imprisoned-parents/reports>

<sup>viii</sup> See, for example: Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107(4), 990–1064; Halsey, M. (2018). 'Everyone is in damage control': The Meanings and Performance of Family for Second and Third Generation Prisoners. In *Prisons, Punishment, and the Family*. Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198810087.003.0014>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-06/prison-phone-calls-costs-australia/102409868>

<sup>x</sup> <https://thejusticemap.substack.com/p/exorbitant-the-staggering-cost-of>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-06/prison-phone-calls-costs-australia/102409868>