THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Managing the Cost of Staying in Touch

Legal & Policy Literacy · Staying Connected During Incarceration

How calls, messages, and mail typically get paid for, and how families keep it sustainable.

IN THIS GUIDE

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- Mail costs and what changes them
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A free guide from My Fairy GodParents — for youth impacted by parental incarceration, justice-impacted youth, and the caregivers and families who support them.
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

Print, write on it, and share it with the people helping your family.

Managing the Cost of Staying in Touch

How calls, messages, and mail typically get paid for, and how families keep it sustainable.

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Staying in touch by phone, video, and mail costs money, and for many families it becomes one of the larger and more unpredictable expenses connected to a loved one's incarceration. Per-minute call rates, video visit fees, and account funding charges vary by facility and vendor, and they are not always obvious until an account has already been set up.

Some states and jurisdictions have passed laws capping call rates or making calls free, while others have not, so the cost a family pays can differ sharply depending on where their loved one is held. This is genuinely a patchwork, and it is worth checking rather than assuming a cost you heard about elsewhere applies to you.

This lesson lays out the categories of cost so a family can budget realistically and ask the right questions, rather than being surprised by a bill or an account fee after the fact.

PHONE AND VIDEO COSTS

Most facilities contract with a single vendor for phone and video service, and that vendor sets the per-minute rate, connection fees, and any charge for funding or maintaining an account. Rates can differ significantly between facilities, even within the same state.

Video visitation, where offered, is frequently billed per session rather than per minute, and equipment or app requirements can add cost if a family does not already have a compatible device.

A number of states have moved to cap in-state call rates or eliminate charges altogether for calls from state facilities, following advocacy specifically focused on this cost. Whether this applies to your situation depends on the state and whether the facility is state, county, or federal, so it is worth asking directly rather than assuming a rule you read about nationally applies locally.

MAIL COSTS AND WHAT CHANGES THEM

Traditional mail costs postage and paper, which is modest, but many facilities now use a scanning system where original mail is digitized and the family receives, or the person inside receives, a copy rather than the physical item. Some of these systems charge a fee to the sender or the recipient's account.

Photos sent by mail sometimes require a specific paper type or format, and some facilities restrict how many can be included per letter, which affects the practical cost of sending photos regularly.

Money sent to a person's commissary or trust account, to cover their own purchases including phone credit in some systems, usually goes through a specific vendor with its own transaction fee, separate from the phone or mail vendor.

+ WAYS FAMILIES REDUCE THE COST WITHOUT REDUCING CONTACT

Ask the facility or vendor whether bulk funding of a phone account reduces per-minute cost or fees compared to funding small amounts repeatedly — some vendors charge a flat fee per funding transaction regardless of amount, which makes smaller, more frequent top-ups more expensive overall.

Some nonprofit and advocacy organizations maintain updated information on state-by-state call rate rules and can point a family toward the current, accurate figure for their state rather than a number that may be outdated.

Where legal aid or family support organizations exist locally, ask whether they know of any available financial assistance specifically for calls, video visits, or trust account deposits — some jurisdictions or nonprofits offer this, though it is not universal.

+ BUDGETING REALISTICALLY

Because rates and rules vary this much, the only reliable way to budget is to get the actual current rate for the actual vendor at the actual facility, rather than estimating from a number seen online or heard from another family.

Once you have the real numbers, decide as a family what a sustainable weekly or monthly amount looks like for calls and video, and communicate that plainly to the incarcerated family member so nobody is caught off guard by a account running low mid-week.

+ THE FEE NOBODY MENTIONED

A mother funding her son's phone account each week noticed the balance never seemed to reflect what she had deposited. After calling the vendor directly, she learned there was a flat transaction fee charged every time she added funds, regardless of the amount — meaning her habit of adding twenty dollars twice a week cost significantly more in fees than adding forty dollars once.

She switched to funding the account once every two weeks with a larger amount and asked the vendor to confirm there were no additional charges beyond the one transaction fee. The total monthly cost dropped noticeably without reducing how much talk time her son actually had.

She also learned, only by asking a local family support organization, that her state had recently capped in-state call rates for state facilities — information that would have changed her budgeting from the start had she known to ask.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Asking the phone vendor about fees

"Can you tell me the per-minute rate for calls from [facility name], and whether there's a separate fee each time I add funds to the account? Is there a way to fund it that avoids repeated transaction fees?"

Asking about state rate caps

Call a legal aid or family advocacy organization, or the state department of corrections.

"I'm trying to find out whether this state caps or has eliminated call rates from state facilities, and whether that applies to the specific facility where my family member is held."

Asking about financial assistance for contact costs

"Are you aware of any financial assistance programs, local or statewide, that help families cover the cost of phone accounts, video visits, or trust account deposits?"

Asking about mail scanning fees

"Does this facility use a mail scanning system, and if so, is there a fee associated with it, and who does it get charged to — the sender or the person receiving it inside?"

+ GETTING A REALISTIC PICTURE OF CONTACT COSTS

- [ ] Get the actual current per-minute phone rate from the vendor for this specific facility.
- [ ] Ask whether there is a transaction fee each time funds are added, and how to minimize it.
- [ ] Ask about video visitation costs and any equipment requirements.
- [ ] Ask whether the facility uses a mail scanning system and whether it carries a fee.
- [ ] Check whether your state has a call rate cap or a free-calls policy, and whether it applies here.
- [ ] Ask a local legal aid or family support organization about any available financial assistance.
- [ ] Set a sustainable weekly or monthly budget for calls and video once you have real numbers.
- [ ] Tell the incarcerated family member the budget plainly so account balances don't run out unexpectedly.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

Do I actually know the current per-minute rate and fee structure for this facility, or am I estimating?

Have I asked whether my state caps or eliminates call rates, and whether that applies here?

Is there a way I am currently funding calls or mail that costs more in fees than it needs to?

What is a sustainable monthly amount for our family to spend on staying in contact, and have we agreed on it together?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

Write down the current monthly cost of contact for your household.

+ WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Written by My Fairy GodParents — reviewed August 2026.
Official reference: Federal Bureau of Prisons — linked for the official rules and forms, which MFGP does not set.
https://www.bop.gov/inmates/custody_and_care/
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You do not have to do this alone.

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myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint