



BARBALUNGA FOR SHERIFF

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“Time For Change – Justice That Works”

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BARBALUNGA SAYS FREE PHONE CALLS FOR INMATES WAS THE RIGHT CALL FOR LAWMAKERS TO MAKE

BERKSHIRE COUNTY—While Governor Charlie Baker and the State Legislature are in the midst of deal-making over legislation that would give jail inmates access to free phone calls, Sheriff candidate Alf Barbalunga says Connecticut has already taken the right step by signing into law a “free call” bill.

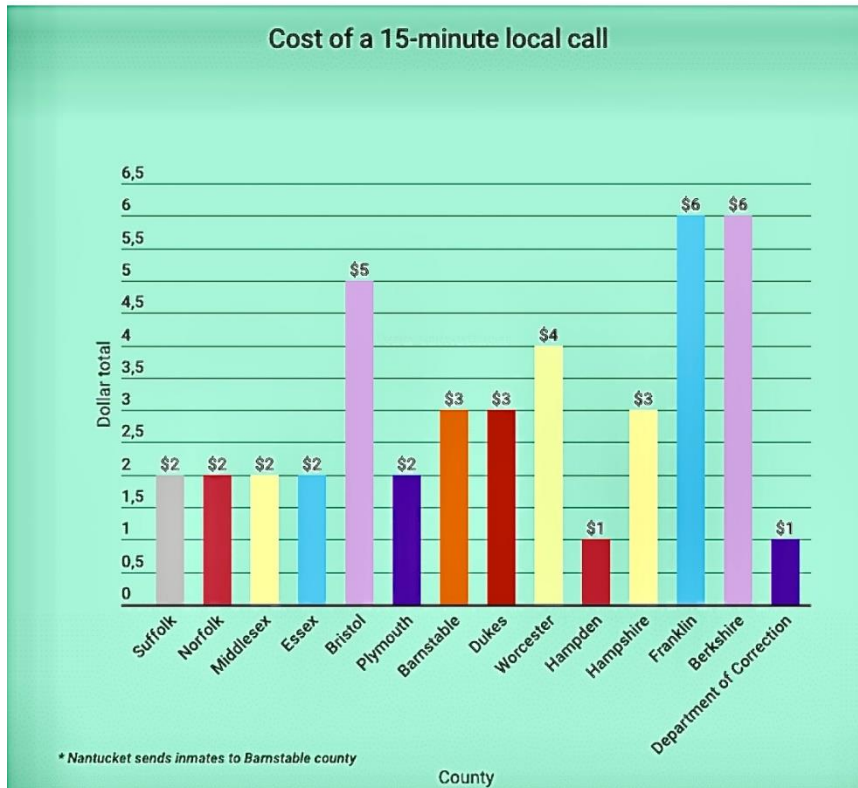
On June 16, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont [signed legislation](#) making Connecticut the first state in the nation to make phone calls free for incarcerated people and their loved ones—fully funded in the budget.

“Charging inmates high costs for phone calls to family works against our main goal of successfully discharging them back to the community,” Barbalunga explains. “Having regular contact with loved ones leads to lower recidivism rates. Isolation from the community is not what we want.” Since families are often the ones paying for the phone calls, Barbalunga says “it’s not right to force families to choose between paying for groceries versus allowing a child to speak with her father.”

In 2020, Berkshire had the highest rate in the state: \$6 for a 15-minute call. The state Department of Correction in its facilities has charged 10 or 11 cents for phone calls under separate contracts they have with phone vendors.

In June of 2021, the Massachusetts Sheriff’s Association announced that each county Sheriff’s department had agreed to provide inmates in county jails and House of Correction with at

least 10 minutes of free phone calls each week, and to lower the cost of phone calls above the 10-minute level. In the past, each county Sheriff could set their own cost for inmate phone calls. According to the Massachusetts Sheriff’s Association, the new lower rate plan was slated to start by August 1, 2021—a year ago this week. “This was a welcomed first step,” Barbalunga says, but he’d like to see free calls implemented by the state. “One 10-minute phone call per week is not enough for a family to feel connected.”



Commonwealth Magazine, 7/28/20

As of 2020, the Berkshire County Jail was receiving \$71,000 a year in “phone commissions” from inmate/family payments. “I’d rather cut back on top administrator’s perks in the jail budget, like the use of state cars for personal travel, and gas cards for commutes to home,” Barbalunga says, “instead of forcing these families to pay every time they want to speak with a loved one in jail.”

“Connecticut has the right approach,” Barbalunga adds. “We’ve got to pay for this in the state budget.” New York City, Los Angeles and other cities, he notes, also provide phone calls at no-cost to incarcerated individuals.

A Massachusetts state law passed in 2009 brought the county sheriffs under the control of state government, and allowed revenues collected from inmates to remain with the sheriff’s office, rather than being transferred to the state. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled in May of this year that Sheriffs can continue to retain inmate telephone revenues.

But the issue did not end there. The General Court recently sent the Governor a provision in the fiscal year 2023 budget for free calls for inmates, and created a \$20 million state fund to reimburse sheriffs and state prisons.

On July 28th, Governor Baker sent the free phone calls language back to the legislature with an amendment that would expand the list of offenses for which a judge can order a defendant held pre-trial, on the grounds that they are considered dangerous. But the Joint Judiciary Committee did not accept the Governor's added language.

"It's important for families to stay in touch with their loved ones," Barbalunga says. "Inmates who have frequent contacts with their loved ones are more likely to be integrated in the community when they return. Free calling is the 'right call' to make."

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