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Austin, TX - As the Texas legislature considers a number of criminal justice policy reforms this legislative sessions, it should continue to forward policies that reduce the number of people behind bars, reform the state jail system, and improve communication between incarcerated people and their loved ones.

Thanks to the hard work of lawmakers and advocates, Texas has seen a number of criminal justice reforms in recent years. In fact, following advocacy by Grassroots Leadership and many of the organizations present today, Texas closed two for-profit prisons during the last legislative session, including the notorious Dawson State Jail, a for-profit state jail in Dallas where multiple women had died of ostensibly preventable illnesses. However, much is left to be done.

“Over the past several years, Texas has made progress towards rolling back its reliance on mass incarceration. However there is tremendous work left to do,” said Bob Libal, executive director of Grassroots Leadership. “Texas still incarcerates more people than any other state in the nation, has more for-profit prisons, jails, and detention centers than any other state, and has one of the nation’s highest incarceration rates. We must continue to move forward with policies to reduce our reliance on incarceration and improve opportunities for individuals to get out of prisons and state jails and stay out for good.”

Grassroots Leadership has worked with coalition with statewide partners to find responsible and fair pathways for individuals to exit the criminal justice system. Texas’ state jail system in particular provides many opportunities for reform that could both improve the lives of those who are sentenced to it, as well as save taxpayers valuable resources.

“Texas should prioritize policies to re-classify non-violent state jail felonies to misdemeanors that do not warrant prison time. It should also legislate measures that give state jail prisoners the ability to pursue diligent participation credits and reduce reliance on incarceration.” said Kymberlie Quong Charles, Criminal Justice Programs Director for Grassroots Leadership. “SB 589 is a win-win both for those serving state jail sentences, as well as the community at large which would be welcoming home people who are better prepared to return to society. What’s more, it will save us much needed state dollars that could be used for expanding the programming opportunities for those wishing to decrease their sentences.”

Texas also lacks clarity on standards concerning the visitation rights of prisoners in county jail. In the absence of clarity on current visitation standards, 13 Texas counties have wholly eliminated all face-to-face visits for families and their incarcerated loved ones and have replaced visits with a video chat service that charges users up to \$20 for 20 minutes of use. Ten additional Texas counties currently offer video chats as an ancillary service to people wishing to see their loved ones but who are unable or choose not to visit in person. Significant technology glitches, poor customer service, cost of use and misuse of the technology have led to three lawsuits in two of the 13 counties where family members of incarcerated people have no choice but to use the service. Families in other counties have experienced similar hardships.

Grassroots Leadership, along with a dozen local and national advocacy groups and individuals, provided testimony in support of legislation would restore and preserve the ability for people in jails to visit with their loved ones in person.

“While we believe that utilizing technology to enhance the ability of family and loved ones to see people who are incarcerated is a good thing, our research found that cost, technological shortcomings, and breeches of prisoners’ rights render current video chat technology a barrier rather than a gateway to quality, meaningful visits between individuals. Furthermore, no such technology should ever be used to garner profit on the backs of individuals who are already bearing the financial burden of supporting an incarcerated loved one,” said Kymberlie Quong Charles, director of Grassroots Leadership’s Criminal Justice Programs. “Many of these people are sitting in county jail because they cannot afford to bond out. To charge their family members to have contact with them is unconscionable. Texas lawmakers should immediately pass legislation that restores face-to-face visitation at all county jails, and prevents counties from ever utilizing technology to remove this right.”

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