

Pro Bono Spotlight: Ameelio.org – Bridging Financial Barriers for Incarcerated Individuals Trying to Stay in Touch with Loved Ones

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Staying in touch with loved ones has become more important today than ever before. While technology offers many ways to stay in contact, incarcerated individuals face barriers to communication. Several prisons have paused in-person visitation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A phone call can cost up to \$25, creating a financial burden for many families of the incarcerated. As the United States, which incarcerates more individuals than any other country, confronts the challenges of its criminal justice system, Proskauer's pro bono client [Ameelio](#), a nonprofit organization, is working to facilitate communication between incarcerated individuals and their families by removing cost barriers.

Ameelio's Founder, **Uzoma Orchingwa**, explains below how he is finding innovative ways to keep people connected, no matter the cost.

Could you briefly explain how Ameelio works?

Ameelio serves as a technological bridge to the outside world for incarcerated individuals. We have three core products, our mobile application where loved ones can upload letters, postcards and photos for incarcerated individuals. Our second product is Letters for Organizations, where Ameelio helps organizations, like ministries, rehab groups, and educators send mass mail to prisons. Our third product is "Connect," which is a videoconferencing tool we are launching in April 2021.

How many individuals have used your services so far? Is there any particular individual or success story that comes to mind?

About 40,000 users have used our mobile app. We've realized that an obstacle for many families is the cost. One in three individuals is driven into debt to maintain communication with an incarcerated individual. One woman, whose husband was in prison, could not afford her health insurance and, at the same time, stay connected with her husband. She was budgeting between speaking with her husband and purchasing her heart medicine.

On your website, you mention the prison telecommunications industry as a “bad actor” - can you elaborate on this?

In the prison communications space, there are “bad actors” who operate business models that revolve around charging high fees to low-income families who cannot afford them. In 39 states, these commission schemes are legal and states get a significant cut from these companies. Once the state signs a contract with the company, the company has a monopoly over the prisons and can charge whatever they like, such as \$25 per phone call.

Our role is to provide a free alternative. No family should pay to speak with their incarcerated loved ones. This has led us to focus on the 11 states that currently do not allow these commission schemes in the prison telecommunication industry. We want our model to incentivize other states to provide free communication instead of partnering with for-profit companies. Studies have shown that the more contact incarcerated individuals maintain while in prison the better they do post-release. Over the long run, it is really in the state's best interest as well.

Can you explain incarcerated individuals' constitutional rights to mail? From your experience, how are these rights being protected in prisons and detention centers?

Incarcerated people have a First Amendment right to the mail. However, states have used safety concerns to justify restrictions and seizures of prison mail. The restrictions incarcerated individuals face vary across the country. Arbitrary punishments that prisoners face as a result of receiving mail disincentivizes families from sending letters and staying in contact.

Can you explain some of the benefits that communication provides to incarcerated individuals?

The more contact incarcerated individuals have with their families the better they do post-release. Ninety-five percent of individuals released will go home to live with family members. If they have a strong support system coming out of prison they are more likely to be successful. Being able to maintain and expand their networks while incarcerated is key to post-release success. Research also finds that prisons are safer when there is more family contact for prisoners. Prisons are extremely isolated places, and it is common for a lot of people to lose hope while inside.

We have adapted this research to develop new content on our app. Now there is a place for users to include articles by pasting a link, or to attach parenting guides, mentally stimulating activities, or even games for their loved ones to enjoy. It comes from the side of bringing hope and uplifting those who are incarcerated.

While in prison many individuals also battle with mental health challenges that stem from a lack of contact and boredom. Something we are looking to do in the future, especially with videoconferencing, is to provide mental health services and providers for incarcerated individuals.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the way your service is conducted?

When prisons shut down in-person visitations, the only options available to people were either phone calls that can get expensive, or sending letters. However, at the time it wasn't safe to go to the convenience store to print photos or mail letters. These challenges really accelerated our services. We launched our website on March 30, 2020, and we have seen exponential growth as our services have become even more needed due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic. There were many ad hoc solutions posed, as the Department of Corrections had to figure out ways to keep families connected. This included using a number of the most popular videoconferencing platforms. However, this put a lot of burden on their staff. Nonetheless, it has allowed these facilities to become more open to the idea of videoconferencing as one of their capabilities.

At Ameelio, our tool will improve upon these platforms.

How has Proskauer helped Ameelio?

Proskauer's lawyers have been really helpful in writing legal research memos and helping us better understand what our rights are to push back on arbitrary responses from the Department of Corrections. There is also peace-of-mind knowing that there are lawyers on our side to provide research and legal advice. There are dominant players that have been there for a long time. Now we feel comfortable enough to push back on the legal side.

How can individuals help Ameelio and, even more broadly, get involved with reforming the criminal justice system?

Donating! As a nonprofit we really appreciate any financial support we receive. In terms of the app, we are always looking for graphic designers to help with creation of new content. A lot of our work is open-sourced so we are looking for people with technical skills. On the policy side, we are trying to learn more about the different rules and regulations in each state, as well as what the state legislature might be interested in right now. For example, in Connecticut and Massachusetts there are bills being presented to shift the costs of communication from the families to the State. We are always looking for folks who can pitch our work and ideas to legislatures in the hopes of initiating bills like this in other states.

A lot of people are looking for ways to have a social impact or contribute to criminal justice reform. Innovations like ours enable people with a technological skillset to become part of this discussion. We utilize their skills to make a social impact.

What's next for Ameelio?

Our 2021 plan is to rollout our free video solution in at least four states, serving tens of thousands of families and their incarcerated loved ones. Our platform will connect families, and also introduce vital virtual services to prisons.

Another project we are really excited about is conducting voter registration in prisons year-round. Twelve million people cycle through jails every year, and many of them don't know that they can vote. We want to help incarcerated people navigate the legal hurdles that are placed on them. It is hard for incarcerated individuals to find registration materials to vote - we have been able to send these materials to people. State laws vary on voter registration. In many states, however, if you are in jail but not convicted of a felony, you can vote.

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