

POLICY BRIEF

# The Connected Release Model

*Digital Access as Standard Reentry Infrastructure*

John P. Figueroa | April 2026

## THE PREMISE

***We are releasing people into a digital-first society without digital access. And then we measure how well they navigate. That is not a gap. That is a design flaw.***

Across the country, pilot programs have demonstrated that providing smartphones at release improves communication, service engagement, and stability. Healthcare systems, local jurisdictions, and research initiatives have all tested variations of this model.

The results are consistent: access changes outcomes.

The issue is not whether this works. The issue is that it has not been adopted as standard practice.

**2 in 3**

people released without a working phone

**90 days**

highest-risk window post-release

**\$35K+**

average annual cost to reincarcerate one person

## WHAT ALREADY EXISTS

This is not a new concept. It is an underutilized one. Programs across the country have already demonstrated a viable path forward:

- Distributed smartphones to individuals leaving incarceration
- Used devices for case management, healthcare access, and service coordination
- Demonstrated improved engagement and continuity of care

At the same time, the Lifeline Program already provides a federal mechanism to subsidize phone and data access for low-income individuals.

***The infrastructure is already in place. What is missing is alignment.***

## THE PROBLEM

---

### Current Reentry Models Rely On:

- Paper referrals
- Delayed service access
- Self-navigation in high-pressure environments

### Modern Life Requires:

- Immediate communication
- Digital job applications
- Real-time coordination and telehealth

Without a phone, individuals cannot apply for jobs, coordinate housing, attend virtual appointments, maintain contact with supervision or providers, or navigate transportation. We are not releasing people into opportunity. We are releasing them into disconnection.

## THE SHIFT: FROM OPTIONAL TO STANDARD

---

Right now, access to a phone at release is program-dependent, location-dependent, and funding-dependent. That creates inconsistency at the exact moment stability matters most.

***This proposal reframes digital access as baseline infrastructure, not a pilot or an add-on.***

## THE CONNECTED RELEASE MODEL

---

Every individual leaving incarceration receives:

- A basic smartphone, pre-configured and activated prior to release
- A minimum of 90 days of service — voice, text, and data
- Preloaded email account setup and job search platforms
- GPS/navigation and telehealth access
- Supervision, case management contacts, and curated local resources

*Devices are activated prior to release, ensuring immediate usability from the first moment of return.*

---

## IMPLEMENTATION PATH

---

This model does not require building new systems. It requires coordination of existing ones.

- Partner with **Lifeline providers** to subsidize service costs
- Establish bulk procurement agreements with telecom carriers
- Integrate device setup into pre-release programming
- Coordinate with community-based organizations for continuity of use

Departments of Corrections do not need to carry this alone. This is a cross-sector solution.

---

## COST REALITY

---

### Cost of the Solution

Smartphone + 90 days service  
Subsidized via Lifeline Program  
Bulk carrier agreements

### Cost of Failure

\$35,000+ per reincarceration  
Emergency services and system strain  
Cycle of disconnection and recidivism

This is one of the rare interventions that is low cost, high impact, and immediately deployable.

---

## CALL TO ACTION

---

***Pilot programs should transition into policy.***

Departments of Corrections, telecommunications providers, and community partners should collaborate to implement and scale a Connected Release model.

Because the question is no longer: "Can we do this?"

The question is: "Why aren't we already doing it?"

**John P. Figueroa, MPA**

[Johnpfigueroa.com](http://Johnpfigueroa.com)