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By Judith Tannenbaum

We who love someone locked behind bars are *not* prisoners, but we *are* trapped. For prisons are an economic, as well as a political and social, reality: There's money to be made and – since we care about our incarcerated husband, father, daughter or friend – much of it can be made off of us.

I am a writer who taught poetry at San Quentin for four years and edited a newsletter for artists teaching behind bars. Each time I visit a former student at one of California's state prisons, I join between one- and three-hundred people who have come to spend a few hours with someone they care for.

As we visitors wait in line, someone is bound to say, "They treat us like *we're* prisoners, and *we're* the ones paying *their* salaries." For it's true, our taxes help pay for the over 38,000 men and women working inside California's penal institutions; our taxes have paid for the twenty-one prisons built since 1983.

Those of us who care for someone in prison seem to be paying *lots* of people's salaries. For example, those of vendors. When we visit, we are not allowed to bring in anything to eat. Instead, we must purchase food from the machines in the visiting room. Each prison contracts with a vendor to provide and stock these machines. A 99-cent convenience store, microwave, hamburger costs \$2.50 from the vending machine; a sixteen ounce bottle of water (60 cents at my local grocery) is \$1.50.

Prisoners must place collect phone calls to us through the company that has won the state contract. Currently this is MCI. In addition to all the normal fees for a collect call, MCI places a \$3.00 surcharge on each prisoner call. One prison visitor is a phone company manager and she said that her boss begins meetings by telling operators, "Be nice to the prisoners; they're your job security."

For those of us who care for someone in prison, love costs.

With a perspective, I'm Judith Tannenbaum.

Judith Tannenbaum is a writer and teacher who has recently completed, *Disguised As A Poem*, a memoir about her years teaching poetry at San Quentin.