

My Journey with *Ameelio*

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Throughout my life, I have always had a passion for understanding and appreciating the complexities of the United States' criminal justice system. The fact that a system so intricate can effectively operate in a country as large as the United States is nothing short of remarkable. With that said, the weaknesses of the system are becoming more and more exposed every day. Some of these weaknesses -- racial injustice, police brutality, and overuse of force -- have been in the mainstream news as awareness has been increasingly gaining traction. Other weaknesses, which are posed in the correctional part of the criminal justice system, have significantly less coverage than their counterparts. Activists and supporters of reform must help bring awareness to these systematic injustices that have less publicity to a mainstream audience. As a result, creating awareness raises the probability of identifying solutions. Those who seek awareness for these injustices will be able help create solutions for the public to endorse and discuss. This paper hopes to encourage youth and young adult activists to pursue and advocate for progressive reform within the criminal justice system through both public policy efforts and non-profit foundations.

Examples of lesser known injustices within the criminal justice system include the controversial private prison industry and the for-profit businesses within the prison industry. Reasons for the lack of awareness vary. As noted by Heather Ann Thompson in her *The Conversation* and *Salon* article, "What's hidden behind the walls of America's prisons," the public lacks knowledge of the issues within the prison system, unless one is directly impacted by these issues. Perplexed by the lack of awareness of the actions and processes happening in these prison complexes, she states, "Somehow, even though these institutions contain human beings, including children, and even though we are the ones who cough up the billions of dollars that it

costs to run them, we are expected simply to trust that they are operated humanely and that they in fact make our society safer.” The absence of awareness on the issues within the prison system creates a public sphere that misplaces blame.

When the public identifies an injustice within the criminal justice system, they tend to blame the governmental representatives they see the most: law enforcement. The reasons they place most of the blame on police departments were explored in the 2004 National Criminal Justice Reference Service report, “Public Opinions of the Police: The Influence of Friends, Family, and News Media.” The report concluded that while many individuals have positive experiences with the police, negative experiences spread comparably faster and impact a wider audience. While law enforcement departments have a role in the injustices the public sees, the prison system and the courts are equally deciding factors in the systematic injustices the public does not see. This paper analyzes three public problems in the U.S. criminal justice system -- predatory capitalism within the for-profit prison industry, the epidemic of mass incarceration, and the absence of available communication resources for families and incarcerated loved ones due to current Covid-19 policy restrictions -- and discusses one way of potentially addressing those problems.

The for-profit prison sector has monetized the prison system and has effectively taken away resources that inmates and their families should be able to access. This was reported notably by the ACLU in their report, “Banking on Bondage: Private Prisons and Mass Incarceration”. The for-profit industry includes the likes of private prisons and private businesses, most of whom charge for services that should be free. The report follows the for-profit prison industry over three decades and concludes that as incarceration rates increased, profit amounts going to the industry are increased. The for-profit industry has effectively

capitalized off of the families of those incarcerated by charging them increasingly high prices for goods and services. Using a standard messaging service, according to the users of these services when interviewed, it costs each family member \$2 to send one letter to their incarcerated loved one. Additional add-ons such as photos are able to be added for an extra fee. While this amounts to no more than a store-bought soda, it gets fairly expensive fast. During my research, I discovered the average user would like to send about 2 letters of day, with some users wanting to send upwards of 10 letters a day. By doing some calculations, \$2 a letter with 2 letters a day for 7 days a week is \$28 a week. The sender ends up paying \$1460 a year. This does not take into account a family in which every family member sends their own letters, nearly tripling or quadrupling the price. This is an astronomical cost for a family to keep in touch with their loved one.

The United States has had an increasingly high incarceration rate which has led to the mass-incarceration epidemic we currently have in the United States, as shown by The Sentencing Project's 2016 "Trends in U.S. Corrections" fact sheet. In addition, a 2012 report from the Vera Institute titled, "The Family and Recidivism," concluded that the ability of incarcerated inmates to keep in touch with the outside world, and more specifically with their family members, lowers their risk of recidivism. Recidivism rate is the percentage of those who were incarcerated that are convicted of another crime after release. By charging families a fee to keep in touch with their loved one, not only does this take a financial toll on the families but also an emotional and mental toll on the inmates themselves. Without a connection to the outside world, the inmate starts to consider his/her incarceration life as the only life, rather than looking forward to future successful social bonds outside of their current life. As the inmate sees jail/prison life as his/her permanent life, a legitimate life without crime starts to seem unpleasant and unrecognizable.

This communication problem within incarceration facilities has increased during the Covid-19 era. Since Covid-19 hit in early 2020, prisoners have been limited in terms of their communication with the outside world. These conditions were discussed in the Prison Legal News article, “Prison Officials Limit Prisoner Communications During COVID-19 Crisis.” In June of 2020, prison officials from the Federal Bureau of Prisons stated, “During this unprecedented response to a pandemic, we have temporarily suspended access to telephones and emails, solely to mitigate the spread of the virus from multiple people touching keyboards and handsets”. This was referring to the newly implemented policies in California facilities at Terminal Island and Lompoc. According to the article, “Almost all BOP facilities have been on modified lockdown since mid-March, with no visitation, and limited access to email, phones, law libraries and copy machines.” Official restrictions on these vital types of human social contact leave families with limited means of communicating with their loved ones. The ACLU has condemned these practices and has also noted that the Federal Bureau of Prisons has tried to control the flow of negative information externally to the media. Inmates who complain about the lack of Covid-19 protection or lack of communication to the outside world have been reportedly punished with loss of privileges and/or confinement.

Ameelio: A Possible Solution

With this, I would like to introduce *Ameelio*. As seen on *Techcrunch*, *Fastcompany*, *BusinessInsider*, and *Washington Post*, *Ameelio* is the first free prison communication platform in the United States. *Ameelio* has two main services: letters for families and letters for organizations. For families or friends of incarcerated individuals, visitors to the *Ameelio* website are encouraged to sign-up to begin use. Once signed in, these family members or friends can search for their loved one using *Ameelio*'s inmate directory tool. Then, they can draft up a letter

via the website, which gets printed and sent physically to the correctional facility. The user can see exactly what the letter would look like once received by the inmate including: font, style, color, word placement, and design. The user may also attach a photo or two along with the letter, all for free. Once printed, the letter is sent from a third-party facility. One of the most impressive features is that the user may track the letter in its journey to the correctional facility. In terms of letters for organizations, organizations may use *Ameelio*'s service to send mass mailing to correctional facilities. *Ameelio*'s site organizes the mailing so each particular organization can track who from their teams sends what letters, how many letters are sent, and to whom are they sending it to per date.

A free letter service like this is unheard of in the prison industry. *Ameelio* provides a better way to communicate with incarcerated loved ones through a free and essentially unlimited website service. It is the counter opponent to capitalistic for-profit companies who charge astronomical prices to allow families to engage in any sorts of communication. It keeps those who are incarcerated engaged with the outside world. This essentially helps lower recidivism rates as established by the study above. It also helps families who are not allowed to see their loved one in the current climate of Covid-19. Many incarceration facilities are limiting their communication services and by having a free available resource like *Ameelio*, families can worry less about the price of communication. The reliability of the service is also a highlight and eliminates the issues of whether a letter will be received by the inmate or if they will be able to actively rhetorically engage with their incarcerated loved one.

My Journey

During the spring 2020 semester at The Pennsylvania State University, I worked tirelessly to find a summer internship that would introduce me to the work force and provide me

new skills in the criminal justice field. I had applied to 20-plus internships and I was down to three government internships in Baltimore, Maryland, where I live. Then Covid-19 hit. The original belief was the virus would be in the United States for a while but, with the right measures, the virus would slow down. The belief was also that the sun weakens the virus and, therefore, the summer would see cases of the virus decrease. This turned out very wrong. Covid-19 not only stormed the United States in the summer of 2020, the number of daily new cases nearly tripled and 158,000 people had died by August 1st. Consequently, all of my internships were canceled, just days before the start.

Internships are valuable in that they provide additional experiences that you may put on your resume that stands out. Simply graduating with a degree is not enough anymore to stay competitive in the modern work force. With this in mind, I was crushed to not find an internship that was remote in the criminal justice field. In order to stay connected to opportunities, I started engaging and following criminal justice networking groups on Facebook. These sites were often filled with spam messages and advertisements that were not useful to me. Yet, when scrolling through my feed one afternoon, I happened upon a group post that detailed *Ameelio*, a website service that provided free communication between families and their incarcerated loved ones. The idea seemed exciting, new, and forward thinking. I discovered the team email at the bottom of the webpage, and I messaged them asking if they had any opportunities for a college student like me. Unexpectedly, they were extremely open to me joining the *Ameelio* team as an intern. After a short interview, we decided the best area to place me was in the outreach and partnerships division.

As I began my journey as an intern for *Ameelio*, I did not know what to expect. While I have worked for a non-profit before, this was something different. *Ameelio* was a startup non-

profit, having only been active for 5 months. Because of its startup status, a lot of work was needed to be done to not only maintain the platform, but to also grow it and its user base. The organization initially consisted of about thirty of us. Structurally, we were a small group of motivated young professionals with consultants to help guide our direction. It was also unique in that nobody in particular was our reporting boss, yet, we all checked each other to make sure we were accomplishing our tasks efficiently. This type of organization fostered a friendly but competitive environment that allowed everyone to thrive. Everyone on *Ameelio*'s team wanted to work hard and build up the *Ameelio* brand. We were all there to push and encourage each other to do our best work. This contrasts a corporate style of organization where there is one single boss that multiple people report to, which can leave employees often feeling inferior to their employer, as according to Brenda Stanton's article, "Why Employees Feel Inferior and What to Do About It." Due to this small community structure, initially, the outreach and partnerships team consisted of the head of the division and me. As such a small team, the amount of work that needed to be done was enormous. Yet, because of the amazing service that *Ameelio* was providing, I knew at that time the impact we would have on the lives of so many families would be even greater.

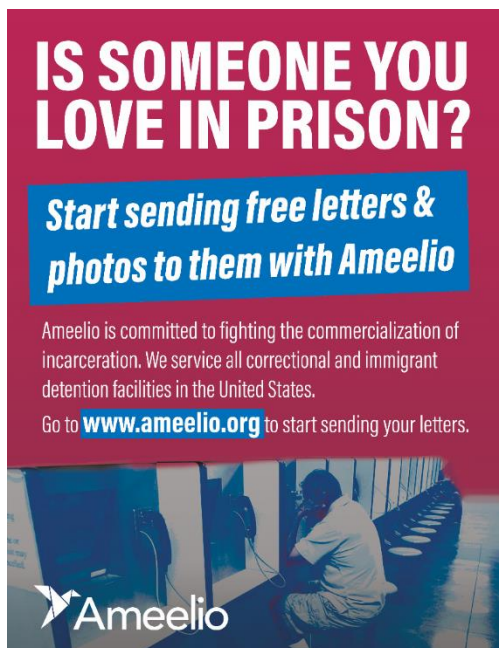
My first few tasks were administrative in nature. My first role was to gather a list of journalists from each state that we could email and ask for them to possibly write an article on us. I cc'd the executive staff in so that once the email was sent, they were able to handle the scheduling of the interview and the meeting. While necessary and important work, it was a long and tedious job. As an intern, I appreciated the tedious work and was more than happy to help out anywhere I could. One of my favorite parts of my first few weeks was interviewing users of *Ameelio* to discover a number of measurements. We wanted to find out who our user base was,

why they use *Ameelio*, their personal stories on how *Ameelio* has impacted their lives, and ways we could improve to better serve our user base. All of these measurements were noted during the discussion and were added to our secure database to make sure only *Ameelio* employees had access to the data.

One woman I interviewed discussed how she tried to send photos to her husband, who was in prison, prior to using *Ameelio* but the standard messaging service had cost her too much money to add on photos. She used *Ameelio* as a tool to send her husband photos of his grandchildren, some of whom he hadn't seen in a few years. He would then keep the letters with photos and hang them on his wall. Later feedback from our numerous interviews revealed that a number of the inmates who received letters from *Ameelio* would post the letters in their cells and show them off to other inmates. It was a sign that someone outside of those walls cared about them. Many of the inmates have been in their cell for years. With Covid-19 impacting every incarceration facility in the United States, in-person visits to the jails/prisons have been understandably cut off. Our users detailed how their photos attached to the letter has helped replace the personal connection of in-person visits for the time being. The number of stories we heard and the ways *Ameelio* had impacted people's lives were remarkable and amazing to say the least. I think it was at this point that I understood my own part and passion in being a criminal justice scholar.

After my introduction to *Ameelio*'s brand and service, I started searching for different ways I could help grow the product and brand. I was running at my local park one afternoon and I began to notice the park becoming extremely populated. With outside attractions seemingly growing more and more crowded since Covid-19 had shut down most gyms, a grass-root campaign in the heart of Baltimore seemed to be a great opportunity to grow the local user base.

After discussing the idea with management, they gave me the opportunity to lead a poster campaign, with Baltimore as the pilot city. I then worked with the design team to create a reputable flyer. I printed a significant amount and spread them all throughout Baltimore, providing them to over 30 businesses who were interested in helping share our service. One week later, the amount of people from Maryland who visited our site grew by nearly 200%.



The concept seemed successful at first. However, we soon realized that while many people were going to the site, very few were signing up. We concluded that the flyers themselves were not enough to have people trust us to use our service. Understandably, people were skeptical of a new service that calls itself “free” without any explanation. How were we free? Where was the catch? What are you doing with my data? How do the letters get to the inmate? With so many questions that needed to be answered, the next grass-roots campaign we considered was setting up a table and handing out flyers, along with providing a summary of how we work and answering any questions. As the only *Ameelio* worker in Baltimore, and, up

until my last month there, in Maryland, I needed to gather volunteers to help me set up and pass out flyers. I was lucky enough to find three local individuals who were able to help me out.

While I have done tabling in the past with prior internships, this was my first time leading a true tabling operation. This includes buying the materials: chairs, tables, and candy to attract people, printing out info guides to keep on the table, creating a sign-up sheet for those who wish to be contacted, and organizing where legally we could set up the table. After these steps were taken, we had our first day tabling on a sunny Saturday morning with one volunteer helping me out. We were in Towson, a hotspot for college kids, but behind a bus stop where regular working-class people come and go. The first day in Towson was interesting to say the least.

Throughout the fascinating experience, we had a number of people come up to talk to us and even more people were given flyers. The population that approached us was diverse. We had homeless people come up and talk to us. We had college students ask for more information. We had working class individuals and then we had businessmen in suits looking to take home one of our flyers. For the first time ever tabling, it was deemed successful. The most memorable and inspirational encounter we had that day was with a group of representatives from a local church. A few of the church members came out to Towson to talk to the local people and pray with them, a program we later learnt was called “Soul Winning”. They came to our table as we were approaching them. We were both eager to hear and talk to each other. After I gave my blurb on what *Ameelio* is and our mission, one of the representatives, who was in his late 20s, responded by calling our free service amazing and life changing. He divulged to us his story on how he grew up in a household with 4 brothers, all of whom who have been either in prison, shot, or caught up in crime. He would write them letters while they were in prison, so he knew firsthand how expensive communicating with incarcerated loved ones really was.

He then proceeded to detail one of the most powerful stories I have ever heard. He grew up seeing the impact crime had had on his brothers' lives. His life took a turn when he started his own business at age 14, buying things cheap and reselling them for a higher price. He made thousands of dollars by doing this. After nearly failing out of school because he was focused solely on his reselling business, he started his own product line which later made him millions of dollars in revenue. Once he became a millionaire in his early 20s, his whole life turned. Drugs, alcohol, gambling, and women became the focus of his life. He felt his life tumbling downward, and after a supernatural occurrence during a dark period of his past, he knew that his life had been saved by God. He decided to forego his successful businesses and then enrolled in one of the most highly regarded bible college programs with a scholarship. These programs teach the same educational material that other colleges teach along with the opportunity to gain a bachelor's degree in an area of choice. However, in addition, they uniquely provide students a strong background of bible studies to encourage the scholars to use their selected studies under the guidance of God and the Church. The motivated and healed man became the local church's head of media and restarted his businesses after he found God.

We started tabling more and more over the next few weeks. Trying to target a different population, we started tabling in inner-city Baltimore, right next to Patterson Park. This part of Baltimore has higher crime rates and is known for late night shootings and drug deals. The park especially became notable in 2019 when Baltimore's top cop was walking with his wife when he was robbed at gun point. Tabling in that area was another eye-opening experience. Within the first five minutes of setting up, we had a young man come over. He stated he was 16 and both of his older brothers were in prison. One was in prison for grand theft auto, another for a marijuana charge. He was telling us his experience with using for-profit communication services, as his

family has been struggling just to pay the rent to keep a roof over their head. The young man thanked us for spreading Ameelio and stated he will use our free service with nearly a tear in his eye.

Experiences like these, with people who are struggling only miles away from your house, living in your neighborhood, really shows how much of an impact you can make if you just give back to your community. Soon after transitioning to Patterson Park, we noticed many stores and shops closing back down because of the influx of Covid-19 cases. Due to this, we stopped tabling for the time being. The tabling was deemed successful by the end of the project as the number of website visitors stayed on par with the flyer project, but with more people signed up.

After my tabling project was finished, my new tasks were to reach out to universities and colleges. The hope was for them to help us grow by reaching out to their students and contacts in the criminal justice field/profession and sharing our service. I spoke to two experts in the criminal justice field and department heads of criminology at their respective universities, who both appreciated the work Ameelio is doing while promising to help share our service. I also had a meeting with the outreach coordinator at a historically black college/university in Texas that connected with our mission. All of the above welcomed Ameelio's service mission and agreed to partner with us in the future to help keep communication in the prison system free. Talking to these scholars in my field and hearing their perspective on current issues made me realize how extraordinary Ameelio's work is in a prison industry that is often for-profit and rarely changes. Understanding my role in helping reform the system will hopefully help lead me to become one of these respected scholars in the future.

Reflection and Call to Action

Commonly, when young students go through their journey within the K-12 school system, it is more than likely that at least one adult will ask those students what they want to be when they grow older. Some ponder for years or even decades before they come to realize their passion. But, for me, I knew where I wanted to be from a young age. From middle school, all the way through high school, to now, I have had an avidity for understanding and analyzing the law. The law is complex, and the purposes of some laws are hard to comprehend. Further, what is legal is not necessarily moral. We, as humans, can easily understand morality. We are brought up on the concept of ethics and morals. The law, meanwhile, is the government's construct on what is and is not acceptable. Marijuana is a great example of this. We all have different thoughts on whether it is morally right to smoke marijuana recreationally. Yet, the law has started to change its stance and legalization is under way in many states. This is not because the science or the chemical components of marijuana have changed, but because of a few basic political ideologies and governmental policies have. Legalization means taxation and deaths by marijuana have been absent, thereby concluding the risk to be minimal and monetary gains for the government to be high. This was detailed in Saeed Richardson's *ChicagoReporter* article, "A moral argument — and course of action — for legalized marijuana in 2020." Richardson identified how legal discourse has changed throughout the centuries through governmental policy and monetary considerations but the moral complexities of it should lead religious leaders to educate rather than condemn. It also discusses the differences between morality and governmentality. The government has changed what they believe to be acceptable in society but the differences in the morality of marijuana growing, selling, and using has stayed relatively the same.

While I have been fascinated by the law for most of my life, I have always thought of myself as a future attorney, someone who studies the law to the highest degree. But the

experience I have had with *Ameelio* has taught me something more about myself: I am enamored with the concept of helping people. Not just the idea of working for a company that helps people, but the actual action of talking to those who are less fortunate, who have struggled, who may be in living situations or family situations they can't get out of, and helping them grow and leave those misfortunes behind. My work with *Ameelio*, and specifically the interviews I had with our users, has rekindled my love for criminal justice reform and progressive criminal justice ideas. This has made me question and reconsider my career goals after my education: should I become an actor in the current criminal justice system and embrace its weaknesses or should I use my legal knowledge to help change the system's processes for the better.

While I appreciate the idea of religion and the community aspect of it, I have often stayed away from religious activities. I believe, before my occurrence with those from the church, I had been to church maybe three times. My family is Methodist, and I was baptized when I was little. But rarely, if ever, did we practice religion in any aspect. On the other hand, my grandmother on my dad's side had always had a religious upbringing and therefore had a connection with God up until her death. When the church representatives, who later turned into our good friends, invited me and my friend to service the following day after our encounter, I didn't know whether to go out of respect or simply ignore the request out of ignorance. My friend was brought up in the church and welcomed the notion of going, so out of respect, I went along with her.

The service was unlike anything I imagined. We walked in and we were greeted by so many friendly faces that you couldn't count. Singing swarmed the room and the bass from the deep voices vibrated in my ears for nearly a half an hour. The sermon was electric. It wasn't just old readings from the bible. It was stories -- modern stories. It was about how religion spoke to people and gave them a better life. It was about how one was on the brink of losing their life

from drugs, alcohol, fame, suicide and religion was there to show them the way to clean and healthy living. They then showed a video of the head pastor going to the rough parts of Baltimore City and praying with gang members. The gang members, who were in their late teens, discussed how they wanted to stop their life of violence and crime but didn't know how to get out. They argued, how could God forgive them for killing, robbing, and raping people during their gang life? The pastor then responded; God will forgive your sins if you let God into your life. The young men broke down in tears and thanked him for his prayers.

Is this not what *Ameelio* is doing for the families of those who are incarcerated? Ultimately, we are both preaching and serving a mission by helping others through a free and passion driven service. That particular morning church service has been extremely impactful on how I look at the meaning of life and my purpose. While I am not sure if I believe in everything related to the concept of a higher being, that is not the point. The point is there is power in hope that services like religion and *Ameelio* bring to the community. I went to two more services after that morning and was baptized in the Holy Ghost and Fire. It was an experience I will never forget.

Throughout the past few months, my journey with *Ameelio* has taken me to incredible highs that I am forever grateful for. I have learned so much and gained so many skills. Some of these are things that you have to experience to understand: how hard it is to start your own business from bottom up, the difficulties of being a non-profit and still needing money to run your organization, professionalism in the workplace, and so many others. Then there are the skills you gain from the work itself: where to find contact data lists on the internet, different growth strategies, new technological growth strategies, research methods in the non-profit world, different marketing strategies and their cost effectiveness, and the legal operations of what you

can and can't do as a non-profit. I would be hard-pressed to find another opportunity that checks all these marks like *Ameelio* does.

Conclusively, I can say *Ameelio* provides a service like no other. For-profit companies have monetized the prison system. They profit off of families of those who are incarcerated by charging them for communication services that should be free. My journey with *Ameelio* has showed me firsthand that there are real people out there that struggle to pay what these companies are asking for, and ultimately, they stop communicating with their incarcerated loved ones because of this. When inmates stop receiving letters, they lose hope that the outside world cares about them, thereby increasing the risk of recidivism once out of prison/jail. As young adult activists and advocates, we need to encourage and educate others about these injustices to endorse the implementation of progressive solutions. Progressive ideas can come from policy decisions within the system or from private citizens creating opportunities, such as the co-founders of *Ameelio* had done, to change the system. Whatever that may be, we must call upon future generations of activists and advocates to prosper, create, and encourage progressive solutions to the systematic injustices that the for-profit prison system creates.