

# These Yale students built an app that makes it super simple for people to communicate with incarcerated loved ones for free

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## Ameelio

- In March, a startup called Ameelio launched an app that helps people communicate with incarcerated loved ones for free.
- Usually, phone calls or text messages to incarcerated people can be expensive, and it can be difficult to find the correct address for mailing a letter. Ameelio allows people to locate an address, upload a letter, and send it for free.
- Ameelio has over 5,200 users and has sent over 21,000 letters so far.
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It can be expensive and difficult for family members to maintain contact with incarcerated loved one: About [one in three](#) families go into debt to pay for phone calls and visits, research shows.

Phone calls in prison are often curtailed and can be costly, and while some facilities allow text messaging, the length of messages can be limited and pricey, too. Family members may want to mail a letter, instead, but struggle to find the correct address.

And now, during the coronavirus pandemic, many prisons have paused visitation.

To make it easier and cheaper for family and friends to connect with their loved ones in prison, two Yale students teamed up to launch an app called

Ameelio in March that makes it dead-simple to send physical letters to incarcerated people for free.

"We wanted to touch on the urgency of the moment," Ameelio co-founder and Yale Law School student Uzoma Orchingwa told Business Insider.

Ameelio allows users to type an incarcerated person's name into its database to automatically pull up the correct address information. Users don't need to worry about getting envelopes and stamps, either: Instead, they can just take a picture of their handwritten letter. Ameelio then works [with mail company Lob](#) to convert the picture to a PDF that Lob prints out and sends. The user can then track the letter until it arrives at its destination. The key feature: It's absolutely free for people to use Ameelio to send letters.

This is especially useful as people may be stuck at home or unable to afford stamps or envelopes during the pandemic, says Emma Gray, head of partnerships and outreach for Ameelio.

"The quarantine is affecting incarcerated men and women themselves," Gray told Business Insider. "They might be solitary. They can't call or contact their loved ones. Their loved ones start worrying."

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## **How Ameelio began**

Orchingwa says that while conducting research on mass incarceration at the University of Cambridge, he found that many people cannot afford to stay in contact with their loved ones who are in prison.

"I realized that the policy prescriptions we need to change the size of our prison system will take a long time to happen," Orchingwa said. "I was looking for ways to make an impact in the long-term."

While studying at Yale, Orchingwa cold-emailed his fellow student Gabriel Saruhashi saying that he was looking for a technical cofounder. Saruhashi had spent a summer interning at Facebook as a software engineer where he felt alienated and like his work was not as meaningful

as he wanted it to be. The two decided to meet up at a cafe and they "hit it off" right away. They decided to start working together on a nonprofit technology company and chose the name Ameelio because it comes from the word "amelioration," which means, 'to make things better.'

Orchingwa says this cause was meaningful to him both because he has close friends who have been incarcerated and because Black people [make up one-third](#) of the prison population in the US.

Likewise, Saruhashi, who is originally from Brazil, says he was shocked to learn more about the American incarceration system.

"Just talking to Zo, I was outraged by the current status system," Saruhashi told Business Insider.

## **Ameelio partners with criminal justice organizations to spread the word and make the service free**

To spread the word about the app, the founders joined Facebook groups for people with family members who are incarcerated. Over half of its users come from recommendations from their own friends and families, or even incarcerated people themselves. Other users learned about the app through these Facebook groups.

Right now, the team of about 45 volunteers, including three formerly incarcerated people, are working on building relationships with lawyers and advocacy organizations to spread the word and also raise funds. Lob lowered its fees for the company and Ameelio has received some funding from Mozilla and a [Kickstarter campaign](#), but it's still looking for other organizations to pitch in so that it can continue to provide the service to users for free.

So far, Ameelio has signed on eight philanthropic partner organizations. Criminal justice organizations have also been reaching out to Ameelio to send out newsletters and introductory letters to incarcerated people.

In addition, it plans to speak with Connecticut lawmakers who are pushing a [bill in Connecticut](#) to make prison phone calls free.

***Read more:*** [Read the letter that more than 1,600 Google employees sent to CEO Sundar Pichai asking the company to stop selling technology to police forces: 'We want Google to take real steps to help dismantle racism.'](#)

While Ameelio started with letters and photos, Orchingwa hopes it can expand to video calling and messaging as well. It plans to run a six-month pilot of its video-conferencing service and has already been talking with five possible partner facilities to provide Ameelio's service free of charge during this pilot.

"We think states are going to be more interested in rolling out virtual communication in prison," Orchingwa said. "We'd love to be able to offer that in the future."

Right now, the main goal is to grow the user base.

"Our users have been reaching out to us and really appreciating the service," Orchingwa said, "Because it allows a different communication tool that is incredibly impactful now that things are incredibly difficult."

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