

June 6, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chuck Grassley
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Diane Feinstein
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators McConnell, Schumer, Grassley, and Feinstein:

We are writing in regard to criminal justice reform and, in particular, the FIRST STEP Act, legislation approved overwhelmingly by the U.S. House of Representatives on May 22. Having spent a total of 352 years in federal and state prison, we bring a unique perspective to this issue, and we ask that you consider our views.

None of us believes the FIRST STEP Act is perfect. We do not believe it would reverse our country's overincarceration problem. All of us would change the bill in different ways and many of us wished it addressed excessive federal mandatory minimum sentences. But we also know that the bill would provide some long overdue relief and hope to more than 180,000 people in federal prison and millions of their family members and loved ones on the outside.

The bill, among other things, would:

- End the barbaric practice of shackling pregnant women in prison;
- Enable everyone in federal prison (except those serving life sentences) to earn more time off for good behavior, thereby allowing them to return to their families sooner;
- Keep families closer together by requiring the Federal Bureau of Prisons to place incarcerated people within 500 driving miles of their home;
- Reform the federal compassionate release program so that taxpayers are not spending millions to keep locked up the most expensive and lowest risk people and so that families can spend a loved one's final days together;
- Invest tens of millions of dollars in recidivism-reducing programming, improving public safety and giving people in prison a true second chance; and
- Require the Federal Bureau of Prisons to obtain government identification cards and birth certificates for people before they leave prison, which is crucial to finding work and getting health care, among other things.

These modest but meaningful reforms would help tens of thousands of families and deserve your support. These reforms would benefit all Americans by increasing the chances that people leaving prison are able to find meaningful work and keep their families together.

Despite the bill's clear benefits, we have heard some people suggest it would be better for Congress to do nothing rather than pass this bill. Such talk reflects a disturbing detachment from the hardships that so many families are experiencing today because of our counterproductive federal sentencing and prison policies.

While we do not claim to speak for all people who are serving time in federal prison or their families, we (or the organizations at which we work) are in touch with tens of thousands of these incarcerated individuals and their families every week. Many of us still have friends and loved ones behind bars. The people we talk to have no use for abstract debates about whether to pass comprehensive or narrow reform, speculative theories about how passing reform today might impact future reform or, worst of all, political gamesmanship. These families just need some help. They shouldn't have to wait any longer.

We also know from our personal experience that meaningful programming, educational, and job training opportunities in the federal system are lacking. All too often people are warehoused for decades with no hope. We know that too many parents are incarcerated so far away from their children that they rarely get to visit them—just imagine seeing your kids once or twice a year, if that. Going without the hugs and kisses of our loved ones for weeks and months was the most difficult part about being in prison. We know others who have gone for years without that critical physical contact. We also know that the Federal Bureau of Prisons' incorrect calculation of good time credit has deprived people of shortening their lengthy prison sentences. If anyone tells you these reforms are not “real” or “meaningful” to vulnerable families and individuals across the country, they simply don't know what they are talking about.

As you consider the FIRST STEP Act and criminal justice reform in the days and weeks ahead, we urge you to keep those in federal prison and their families foremost in your mind. They can't wait for reform.

Sincerely,

Shon Hopwood – federal prison, 10 years
*Law Professor, Georgetown University Law Center**

Norman Brown – federal prison, 24.5 years
Dep. Project Director, Project New Opportunity

Topeka K. Sam – federal prison, 3 years
Director for #Dignity Campaign, #cut50

Kevin Ring – federal prison, 1.5 years
President, FAMM

Syrita Steib-Martin – federal prison, 9 years
Executive Director of Operation Restoration

Amy Povah – federal prison, 9 years
President, CAN-DO Foundation

Pat Nolan – federal prison, 2.5 years
Director, Center for Criminal Justice Reform at the American Conservative Union Foundation

Craig DeRoche – state prison
Senior Vice President of Advocacy and Public Policy, Prison Fellowship

Debi Campbell – federal prison, 16 years
Communications Outreach Associate, FAMM

Michael Santos – federal prison, 26 years
Co-founder of Prison Professors L.L.C.

Loretta Fish Liegel – federal prison 6.5 years
Registered nurse; motivational speaker

Monroe Coleman – federal prison, 32 years

Michael Mendoza – state prison, 17 years
Policy Associate, #cut50

Stephanie Nodd – federal prison, 21 years

Leyla Martinez – state prison, 2 years
President, Beyond the Box Initiative

Glenn E. Martin – state prison, 6 years
Founder & President, GEM Trainers

Jeffrey Smith – federal prison, 1 year
Executive vice president, Concordance Academy of Leadership; former Missouri State Senator and public policy professor

Weldon Angelos – federal prison, 13 years
Musician; justice reform advocate

Bernard B. Kerik – federal prison, 3 years
Retired NYC Police Commissioner and former NYC Correction Commissioner

David Safavian – federal prison, 1 year

Deputy Director, Center for Criminal Justice Reform at the American Conservative Union Foundation

Desmond Meade – state and federal prison, 3 years
Executive Director, Florida Rights Restoration Coalition

Evans Ray – federal prison, 12 years

Alfonzo Ingram – federal prison, 13 years
Prison Fellowship prison program graduate

Richard MacAllaster – federal prison, 6 years

Brandon Sample – federal prison, 12 years
Attorney & Executive Director, Prisology

Celeste Wells – federal and state prison, 26.5 years
President & CEO, Save My Edges, Inc.

Joshua B. Hoe – state prison, 3 years
Host of Decarceration Nation

Victoria Wylie – federal prison, 1.5 years
Board member Operation Restoration

Ivy Woolf Turk – federal prison, 4 years
Founder/Director, Project Liberation

Tarra Simmons – state prison, 1.5 years
Skadden Fellow at Public Defender Association

Joshua Boyer – federal prison, 17 years
President Obama clemency recipient and criminal justice reform advocate

Reginald Dwayne Betts, Esq. – state prison, 8 years
Poet and Author

Christopher R. Poulos – federal prison, 3 years
Attorney & Co-chair, Civil Survival

Nina Manning – federal prison, 10 years
President, Fedfam4life

Tray Johns – federal prison, 9 years
Executive Director, Fedfam4life

Kathy Morse – state prison, 4.5 years
Advocate, participant, "Rikers: An American Jail"

Denise C McCreary – federal prison, 3.5 years
Executive Director, Hands Of Hope Outreach Ministries, Inc.

Melissa Shumsky – federal prison, 1.5 years
Member Engagement Coordinator, Anti-Recidivism Coalition

Justin Paperny – federal prison, 1 year
Co-founder of Prison Professors L.L.C.

Andrew Cory Greene – state prison, 8 years
Co Founder and Organizer, How Our Lives Link Altogether! (H.O.L.L.A!)

** Occupations and titles listed for reference only. Individuals have signed in personal capacity.*