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December 17, 2018

The Honorable Donald J. Trump  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Congress is on the verge of passing the most comprehensive criminal justice reform package of the last three decades, thanks to your leadership. The *First Step Act* (S. 3747) is the product of careful bipartisan and bicameral negotiations. However, last minute changes suggested by Senators Cotton

(AR) and Kennedy (LA) pose a risk that they will upset the delicate balance that has made movement of this bill possible. We urge you to oppose these amendments.

### **1. Expanding the Exclusions List Undermines Public Safety**

The first amendment to be offered by Senators Kennedy and Cotton is an expansion of the list of offenders who would be ineligible to use earned time credit under the *First Step Act*. It is premised on the inaccurate claim that offenders who use earned time credits are entitled to an early release.

The legislation's earned time framework is a critical incentive to encourage offenders to complete evidence-based rehabilitative programming, which research and experience tells us cuts recidivism and increases public safety. Use of earned time credits, however, does not impact the date upon which an offender is released from custody. Rather, earned time credits may be used by an offender to move to *pre-release* custody (*i.e.*, residential reentry centers or home confinement). During that time, all offenders remain subject to Bureau of Prisons regulations and strict oversight. Moreover, before offenders are permitted to "cash in" earned time credits, they must demonstrate they are no longer a threat to public safety, based on objective, evidence-based risk assessments.

The Cotton-Kennedy amendment would exclude from "earned time credits" anyone convicted of any offenses in which the elements *or* facts of the offense involved the substantial risk of physical force against a person *or* property. This exception would make virtually all federal prisoners ineligible for earned time credits, with the exceptions of low-level drug offenders and white collar criminals. The Supreme Court has found this exact language to be unconstitutionally vague in two opinions, *Sessions v. Dimaya* and *Johnson v. United States*.

The amendment is antithetical to the heart of the bill. It would deny incentives for rehabilitative programming to the offenders in most need of it. And in doing so, the amendment would maintain the status quo in our prisons, thereby continuing to put communities at risk.

### **2. Undermining an Evidence-Based Approach to Risk Assessment**

The second Cotton-Kennedy amendment has two components: (a) it would permit wardens to ignore evidence-based risk assessment tools and veto the use of earned time credits by low- or minimum-risk offenders; and (b) it would require wardens to consider a victim impact statement in that calculation.

#### *(a) Providing Wardens Veto Authority*

The core of the *First Step Act* rests on *objective, evidence-based* risk assessments to ensure prisoners leave prison prepared to be productive members of society. Converting what should be an objective assessment into a subjective, bureaucratic process governed by wardens leaves important public safety considerations open to emotion, human error, and, potentially, bias.

#### *(b) Victim Impact Statements*

As groups dedicated to promoting and preserving public safety, we also believe victims deserve respect, consideration, consultation, and information. Indeed, current law (18 USC sec. 3771) requires exactly that. Victims must also be protected. But they have no objective insight into whether an

offender has rehabilitated himself. Providing a *de facto* veto to victims would reject the evidence-based approach upon which the *First Step Act* is based.

### **3. Additional Reporting Requirements are Based on Inaccurate Metrics**

The third Cotton-Kennedy amendment would require the Bureau of Prisons to publicly report on the re-arrest data of each prisoner. We support the use of accurate data to make public policy and measure results.

However, the metric contained in the third Cotton-Kennedy amendment is flawed. Arrests are not a proxy for subsequent criminal conduct. Data collection should be based on whether ex-offenders have been *convicted* of new crimes after leaving the custody of the Bureau of Prisons.

We would support a standardized definition of recidivism for data gathering and statistical purposes that is based on subsequent *convictions*. Indeed, we believe such a standard definition would validate the approaches taken in the *First Step Act* and in various states that have led the way on reforming their own justice systems.

### **Conclusion**

The amendments proposed by Senators Cotton and Kennedy will weaken what would otherwise be a significant step towards making our federal prisons more accountable and results-oriented. Beyond substance, however, they are political “poison pills.” The changes proposed are intended to upset the delicate balance found by stakeholders in both chambers, in both parties, and at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. We urge you to oppose the Cotton-Kennedy amendments to the *First Step Act*.

Finally, thank you for making criminal justice and prison reform a priority for your Administration. We would not be where we are today, but for your support and the tireless efforts of Jared Kushner, Brooke Rollins, and the Office of American Innovation.

Respectfully,

David Safavian, Esq.  
General Counsel  
American Conservative Union

Jason Pye  
Vice President, Legislative Affairs  
FreedomWorks

Marc Levin, Esq.  
Vice President of Criminal Justice Policy  
Right on Crime

Kevin Ring  
President  
FAMM

Jessica Jackson, Esq.  
National Director and Co-Founder  
#Cut50

Holly Harris  
Executive Director  
US Justice Action Network

Arthur Rizer, Esq.  
Director of Criminal Justice & Civil Liberties Policy  
R Street Institute

Tim Head, Esq.  
Executive Director  
Faith and Freedom Coalition

Mark Holden, Esq.  
President  
Freedom Partners

Craig DeRoche  
Senior Vice President for Public Policy  
Prison Fellowship

Josh Crawford, J.D.  
Director of Criminal Justice Policy  
Pegasus Institute

Grover G. Norquist  
President  
Americans for Tax Reform

Tim Chapman  
Executive Director  
Heritage Action for America

John Wetzel  
President  
Association of State Correctional Administrators

Van Jones  
Host  
The Van Jones Show, CNN

Mark Varca, J.D.  
Chairman  
FederalCURE

Kevin Roberts, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Texas Public Policy Foundation

David Borden  
Executive Director  
StoptheDrugWar.org

Brent Gardner  
Chief Government Affairs Officer  
Americans for Prosperity

Katie McAuliffe  
Executive Director  
Digital Liberty

Amy Povah  
President  
CanDO Clemency

John Stanard  
National Director, Social  
Betterment Programs and Policy  
Church of Scientology

CC: Jared Kushner, Senior Adviser to the President  
Brooke Rollins, Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental and Technology Initiatives  
Shahira Knight, Assistant to the President and Director of the White House Office of Legislative Affairs  
Ja'Ron Smith, Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy