



SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS

Friends Committee on National Legislation

A Quaker Lobby in the Public Interest

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Paul D. Ryan
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
House Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Friends Committee on National Legislation, a Quaker lobby in the public interest, urges you to quickly pass the FIRST STEP Act (S.756) as introduced by Senators Grassley and Durbin before the end of the year. The Religious Society of Friends believes that there is that of God in everyone. Quakers call for a transformation of our current system of criminal justice, which today is used principally as an instrument of retribution — a policy contrary to our Quaker beliefs. Friends gather for silent worship in prisons; administer Anti-Violence Project (AVP) programming to nonviolent and violent offenders; and help inside prisons in other ways.

The FIRST STEP Act brings more fairness into the justice system by reducing extremely long prison sentences for non-violent crimes paired with improved rehabilitation for those currently in prison. Our faith shows us that rehabilitation and growth is possible. A nation that removes fathers, mothers, people, and even children from their communities for decades even life imprisonment for drugs has no justice.

The FIRST STEP Act includes promising reductions to mandatory minimum sentences. Allowing Senate appointed, federal judges more discretion to look at the complete facts of the case:

- I. The Safety Valve provisions would allow judges to sentence more fairly by departing from some drug mandatory minimum sentences;
- II. The reductions in the 924c “stacking” and 851 would bring meaningful changes to some of the longest mandatory sentences. These sentences result in additional lengthy sentences on top of already, overly-long mandatory minimum sentences—sometimes life sentences;
- III. Lastly, in 2010 Congress decided to make prison sentences fairer by reducing the racist crack and powder cocaine disparity in criminal sentencing by enacting the Fair Sentencing Act. The FIRST STEP Act would finally make those sentences apply retroactively by way of judicial review.



We were also pleased with the inclusion of the Second Chance Reauthorization Act. This legislation will reauthorize important grant programs going to community-based organizations across the nation. These are vital services that can mean giving formerly incarcerated individuals a new chance at life. These programs range from drug treatment, mental health services, educational programming, job training and more services for returning citizens. These grant programs can mean the difference between success and failure for people leaving prison during a very difficult transition.

The FIRST STEP Act contains provisions, which we do not support. It fails to apply certain sentencing reductions retroactively making those sitting in prison serve sentences Congress will have deemed unfair. Some of these people will die in prison due to Congressional inaction. The lengthy exemptions to participate in prison programming mean that many who need help will not receive it. The risk assessments will likely result in systemic racial disparities deciding whether someone can be placed in pre-release custody before going home.

As an organization of faith, we are guided by the truth that people share in the Light of God. The consistent exclusion of violent offenders ignores societal problems; including that prisons should help individuals find wholeness and rehabilitation. Reforms should factor all people and seriously address problems in prisons and society. Prisons should not serve as perpetual warehouses for human beings.

We hope that the Senate and House quickly pass S.756 the FIRST STEP Act. Thousands sitting in federal prison deserve relief, so we can continue addressing the harms of mass incarceration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane Randall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Diane Randall
Executive Secretary
Friends Committee on National Legislation