

The Honorable Bob Goodlatte
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
United States House
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States House
Washington, D.C. 20515

March 12, 2018

RE: Faith community urges House introduction and passage of sentencing reform

Dear Chairman Goodlatte and Ranking Member Nadler,

The undersigned faith organizations call for the introduction and passage of robust sentencing reform as a necessary component of comprehensive criminal justice reform in the House Judiciary Committee. We are united in the belief that criminal justice reform is comprised of prospective and retroactive reductions in mandatory minimum sentences. Congress is the law making body and should put forth a meaningful criminal justice reform package such as it did in the 114th Congress. The Sentencing Reform Act in the last Congress (H.R. 3713) was the linchpin of reform. Prison reform and reentry programs, while necessary, will not do enough to stem the tide of mass incarceration.

We urge the House Judiciary Committee to re-introduce an unchanged Sentencing Reform Act from last Congress. When this legislation is introduced, we urge the Committee to bring it along with the Prison Reform and Redemption Act (H.R.3356) and the Second Chance Reauthorization Act (H.R. 2899) through committee as a package. H.R. 3356 and H.R. 2899 are pieces of legislation that need to be paired with sentencing reform to constitute real criminal justice reform. **Prison reform without sentencing legislation, or with pared down sentencing components, would be both incomplete and very difficult to reconcile with the Senate's Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (S. 1917).**

Our faith communities are on the ground in neighborhoods ravaged by a broken criminal justice system. We see this nation's reliance on mass incarceration to solve drug addiction, poverty, mental illness and joblessness – societal problems that are exacerbated in communities of color by racial disparities – as an affront to justice and human dignity. A federal prison crisis is looming due to overcrowding caused both by excessive mandatory minimum sentences and a prison system with limited rehabilitative opportunities. Our moral sensibility compels faith leaders across the country to advocate for sentencing reform and we can no longer wait for action.

We believe continued inaction will harm children and families across the country. Approximately five million children have at least one parent in prison. The long absence of parents, who are loved, valued, and critical to maintaining their children's well-being, has a lasting impact. On average, households with an incarcerated family member owe more than \$13,000 in court fees alone—this is almost half of the annual income of low-income households. Consequently, nearly two-thirds of families with an incarcerated member were unable to meet their family's basic needs, such as food, housing, and other needs for children.ⁱ While 1 in 28 American children has an incarcerated parent, 1 in 9 African American children are impacted in this way.ⁱⁱ

Finally, studies have shown that imprisonment can create or worsen mental health problems among the incarcerated, decrease incarcerated people's employment opportunities post-release, increase rates of poverty, and harm people connected to the inmates and families, as discussed above. The challenges incarcerated

people face in prison impede their ability to become productive members of society after their release -- thus mandatory minimums become a contributing factor to recidivism.ⁱⁱⁱ These impacts of incarceration increase with longer sentences.^{iv}

While even the package of reforms approved by the House Judiciary Committee in the 114th Congress (H.R. 3713, H.R. 759 and H.R. 3406) did not fully address all of our concerns with the federal criminal justice system, it would contribute to a criminal justice system that is fairer and less focused on retribution. **We call for reintroduction of an unchanged Sentencing Reform Act to accompany the Prison Reform and Redemption Act (H.R.3356) and the Second Chance Reauthorization Act (H.R. 2899) as a House Judiciary package.** Our faith in the divine and commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every human life compels us as a faith community to call for reforms that bring us closer to the end of mass incarceration. We are united in our belief that criminal justice policies based solely on the intention to punish the offender are both ungodly and ineffective. Reducing sentences to more appropriate lengths and providing opportunities after incarceration are both critical.

Sincerely,

Africa Faith & Justice Network
Alliance of Baptists
American Baptist Home Mission Societies
American Friends Service Committee
Bread for the World
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
The Episcopal Church
Faith Action Network – Washington
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Interfaith Action for Human Rights
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Mennonite Central Committee- Washington Office
National Alliance of Faith and Justice
National Council of Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Religious Campaign Against Torture
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Office of Justice and Ecology, Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States
Office of Social Justice, Christian Reformed Church in North America
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights

CC: Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. House

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- i [“Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families,”](#) The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, September 2015.
- ii [“One in nine black children has had a parent in prison,”](#) The Washington Post, October 27 2015.
- iii [“The Growth of Incarceration in the United States Exploring Causes and Consequences,”](#) National Research Council, October 2014.
- iv [“The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment,”](#) Craig Haney, University of California Santa Cruz, 2001.