

The Honorable Charles Grassley
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

February 14, 2018

RE: Faith community calls for the Judiciary Committee to pass the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, S. 1917

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Feinstein,

The **60** undersigned faith organizations write today in support of the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (S. 1917). We are delighted by the re-introduction of this critical legislation and the broad bipartisan consensus calling for an end to the federal prison crisis. **We share your commitment to criminal justice reform and look forward to the hearing on this legislation and eventual passage in the Senate Judiciary Committee.**

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. As people of faith, we are called both to comfort and to serve those harmed by crime, as well as to support accountability, rehabilitation and restoration for those who offend. To that end, we are joined in our commitment to advancing the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act.

The ongoing crisis of overcrowding in our federal prison system, resulting from excessive mandatory minimum sentences, is exacerbated by high levels of recidivism due in large part to a system that provides limited rehabilitative opportunities. Our moral sensibility compels faith leaders across the country to call for reform. We can no longer wait for action. The politics in Washington may have changed, but we know first-hand that the injustices of mass incarceration across the country have not. To miss the opportunity to pass the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act would be a major deferral of justice for thousands of people who need a fairer sentencing system and rehabilitation.

We support the drug felony sentencing reductions proposed in the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, including the elimination of the excessive “three strikes” life imprisonment for prior drug felony convictions, out of a shared belief in fairness and second chances. People are more than their offenses and have the human capacity for growth, change, and redemption. This belief is why our faith organizations also support provisions giving judges greater discretion to take individual details into account when sentencing below or above the formulaic mandatory minimums required under current law.

Moreover, we believe continued inaction will harm children and families across the country. The burden of mass incarceration is felt most intensely by children with parents in prison or labeled with a criminal record. The long absence of mothers and fathers, who are loved, valued, and critical to maintaining their children's well-being, has a lasting impact. Many families lose income when a parent is incarcerated. On average, households with an incarcerated family member owe more than \$13,000 in court fees alone, an amount that is nearly half of the average annual income of low-income households. Consequently, according to a recent study by the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, nearly two-thirds of families with an incarcerated member were unable to meet their family's basic needs, such as food and housing for children. Nationally, 1 in 28 children has an incarcerated parent, as does 1 in 9 African-American children. Their likelihood of incarceration increases when this disruption enters their life. In order to strengthen family relationships and

make sure proportionate justice is meted out, we support the provisions to limit federal life sentences for youth and adults and the elimination of youth solitary confinement.

We are also eager to see this legislation provide for further resources for rehabilitative programming, including expanding access to treatment, restorative justice/diversion programs, and education for those in prison.

We do not support the new mandatory minimum sentences and sentencing enhancements currently prescribed in S.1917, including the sentencing enhancement for fentanyl of up to five years. There is no empirical evidence supporting the notion that new sentencing enhancements will have any impact in reducing the trafficking or use of this or any other drug. Further, this kind of enforcement-first policy in previous legislation has led to the problems we are now seeking to correct. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the nature of compromise and the bill's overall contribution to furthering a fair and proportional justice system not disproportionately focused on retribution and damage.

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. Individuals from specific communities or groups are not born onto this earth predetermined to become violators of the law. We support policies based on principles of rehabilitation and redemption of the human spirit. Rehabilitation is defined as the act of restoring something to its original state. The formerly incarcerated so restored can return to our communities as contributing members of society.

We look forward to moving this legislation forward through the Judiciary Committee and call for Senators to vote in favor of S.1917.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Adorers of the Blood of Christ, U.S. Region
Africa Faith & Justice Network
African American Ministers In Action
Alliance of Baptists
American Baptist Home Mission Societies
American Friends Service Committee
Bend the Arc Jewish Action
Bread for the World
BuddhaFest
Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS)
Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good
Church of the Brethren
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Disciples Center for Public Witness
Disciples Home Missions
The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
ExodusFoundation.org
Faith Action Network – Washington
Faith in Public Life

Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
The Global Justice Institute
Ignatian Solidarity Network
Insight Meditation Society
Islamic Society of North America, Office for Interfaith & Community Alliances
Jesuit Conference, Office of Justice and Ecology
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Kentucky Council of Churches
Lutheran Services in America
Mennonite Central Committee – Washington Office
Methodist Federation for Social Action
Metropolitan Community Churches
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
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
Nichiren Order of North America
Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, Comboni Missionaries, North American Province
Office of Social Justice, Christian Reformed Church
Pax Christi USA
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Provincial Council of the Clerics of St. Viator (Viatorians)
Riverside Church – New York City
Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Institute Justice Team
The Society of the Divine Savior USA
Sojourners
Tampa Bay Center for Community Transformation - Florida
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
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
United (Vietnamese) Buddhist Churches
Volunteers of America

Cc: Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate