



FAITH & FREEDOM COALITION

December 10, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

On behalf of the over 1.8 million members and supporters of the Faith & Freedom Coalition, we are writing to voice our continued support for the FIRST STEP Act including the sentencing reforms being considered by Senators Grassley and Durbin. The bill promotes public safety and gives people in prison access to the transformational programming they need to earn back the public's trust and to return home as good spouses, parents and neighbors. While we expect there are further changes that will be made to the bill to correct some omissions and clarify the bill's intent, we applaud the thoughtful deliberations resulting in this important reform legislation as well as President Trump's strong support for the bill.

Crime demands accountability. It's not a question of whether to punish wrongdoing, but for how long and for what purpose. Punishment should be proportionate to the offense and prisons should reflect the social values we expect men and women to practice upon release. This legislation reflects these goals and will help to restore all parties impacted by crime and incarceration.

The FIRST STEP Act implements a post-sentencing risk assessment system to determine a person's risk of committing more crimes upon release from prison. Under the legislation, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) would utilize effective recidivism reduction programs and provide incentives to participate in those programs. Ultimately, prisoners could earn credits toward an alternative custody arrangement – such as a halfway house or home confinement – near the end of their prison sentence.

These changes will help address the enormous growth in the federal prison system. The federal prison population has increased from approximately 25,000 in 1980 to over 195,000 today. Today, federal prisons are overcrowded, especially in high security facilities, putting corrections officials and prisoners at risk and making it more difficult to operate effective faith-based and other recidivism-reduction programs. The large prison population also comes at a price. The Bureau of Prisons' budget has doubled

over the past decade, reaching approximately \$7 billion and roughly 25 percent of the Department of Justice's total budget.

Recognizing this great expense, the legislation directs BOP to expand recidivism reduction programming and productive activity, such as drug rehabilitation, education, skills training, faith-based classes, and work programs, for all federal prisoners in partnership with non-profit and faith-based organizations. The Bureau of Prisons is directed to use risk and needs assessment tools to assign the most effective amount and type of programming to each prisoner and provides incentives for program participation. Prisoners that have not committed certain serious and violent offenses, defined in the bill, may use time credits earned from program completion toward prerelease custody. All federal prisoners who complete programs are eligible for incentives developed by the Bureau of Prisons, such as increased telephone or visitation privileges.

In addition, there are a number of other important provisions. The Act extends compassionate release which permits prisoners, including elderly prisoners, to request compassionate release if they meet the requirements set out in the law. The Act requires BOP to provide feminine hygiene products to female inmates at no cost and codifies rules generally prohibiting the use of restraints on pregnant prisoners—both are long overdue. Also, recognizing the importance of maintaining family relationships during incarceration, the Act requires prisoners to be placed in a facility as close as practicable to the prisoner's primary residence, but, in any case, not more than 500 driving miles from the prisoner's primary residence. The Act requires BOP to help prisoners obtain identification (including a social security card, driver's license or other official photo identification, and a birth certificate) prior to release so that they can find housing and apply for employment which are the first steps in successfully reentering society. Finally, the Act expands inmate employment through Federal Prison Industries. These provisions all serve to make our prison system more humane and more effective.

For the past several years, Faith & Freedom Coalition has actively supported a wide variety of federal and state initiatives to improve our criminal justice system. While there is much more that we hope to see done in the future, the FIRST STEP Act is just that—a first and critical step forward that will increase public safety, reduce costs, strengthen families and change lives for the better. Congress has spent years talking about reforms to reduce recidivism and restore lives, it is time to act.

Thank you for your leadership and for considering the views of our members and supporters. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to ensure the passage of this legislation.

Sincerely,



Ralph Reed
Chairman
Faith & Freedom Coalition

Sincerely,



Timothy R. Head
Executive Director
Faith & Freedom Coalition