

The Honorable Charles Grassley  
U.S. Senate  
Judiciary Committee  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy  
U.S. Senate  
Judiciary Committee  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert Goodlatte  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Judiciary Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Conyers  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Judiciary Committee  
Washington, DC 20515

February 27, 2015

**RE: Interfaith coalition urges transformational change to U.S. criminal justice system**

Dear Chairmen Grassley and Goodlatte and Ranking Members Leahy and Conyers:

As organizations representing the many millions of people of faith and goodwill in the United States, we write to you to express our deepest concern for the men, women and children arrested, sentenced, incarcerated and returned home from incarceration throughout this country. People entangled within this troubled criminal justice system are members of our beloved families and communities of faith. On their behalf and ours, we urge you to authorize justice policies during the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress that will restore equity, end excessive punishments, promote alternatives to incarceration, encourage rehabilitation and reintegration and protect the dignity and well-being of everyone impacted by the system.

We applaud the many thoughtful leaders in Congress engaged in conversations to improve and reform the justice system. We believe this year is the time to be moving from conversation to enacting transformational change. To that end, we seek your support in advancing these reforms:

**Fixing the Federal Bureau of Prisons Crisis:** Since 1980, the size of the federal prison population has increased nearly 800%. Prisons are dangerously overcrowded and programming and treatment opportunities are lacking. Moreover, the Government Accountability Office found the BOP makes extensive use of long term isolation, with 7% of prisoners in segregation, despite the devastating psychological effects of such conditions. The growing cost of running this dysfunctional system is squeezing out critically important funding streams within the Department of Justice budget for crime prevention, reentry and victim assistance. Mandatory minimum penalties have substantially contributed to the increase in the federal prison population and must be addressed by Congress to curb the crisis. According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission's 2011 report on mandatory minimum penalties, "certain mandatory minimum provisions apply too broadly, are set too high, or both, to warrant the prescribed minimum penalty... This has led to inconsistencies in application of certain mandatory minimum penalties...."

**Establishing Trust Between Law Enforcement and Communities of Color:** Nationwide surveys indicate that during traffic stops black and Hispanic drivers are three times more likely

than whites to be searched by police. Blacks are also twice as likely as whites to be arrested during a traffic stop despite the fact that police generally have lower “contraband hit rates” when they search black versus white drivers. Moreover, studies conducted between 2002 and 2008 have shown Hispanics were up to twice as likely and blacks were up to three times as likely as whites to experience physical force or the threat of force when encountering police. These disturbing trends are emblematic of the racial disparity that happens at every stage of the justice system and affects the federal justice system as well. In 2011, the U.S. Sentencing Commission found black defendants were more likely to receive mandatory minimum penalties, in 60.6% of drug cases carrying such a penalty. Hispanic defendants were sentenced to a mandatory minimum in 41% of such cases and whites in 36.3%. These unchecked disparities have communicated a clear message to communities of color that equality, as guaranteed under our Constitution, does not exist.

**Investing in Human Potential to Ensure Public Safety:** Each year 600,000 people leave prisons and millions more cycle in and out of local jails. They join the approximately 65 million people in the United States with a criminal record. To avoid adding to this stark statistic we support significant investment in programming to help youth and adults from ever entering the justice system. For example, comprehensive community mental health services, substance addiction treatment for low income people as well as job training and apprenticeship programs would address some of the conditions that lead to crime. Moreover, once a person enters the justice system he/she will need significant supports to successfully exit the system and reintegrate back into our communities. Unfortunately, many individuals returning from prison are banned from accessing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, housing assistance, and other public benefits that enable people to get on their feet and establish some economic security. Congress should utilize its authority to end baseless collateral consequences and support reentry services.

As faith leaders, we are committed to addressing the complicated and multi-faceted factors that contribute to the United States’ mass incarceration problem. We urge Congress to lead the nation in advancing justice reforms that build trust among its people, value human life, and ensure equality and proportionality. Your work is vitally important and we are eager to engage with you to accomplish these objectives.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss these issues further, please contact Kara Gotsch of the Interfaith Criminal Justice Coalition at [kgotsch@umc-gbcs.org](mailto:kgotsch@umc-gbcs.org) or 202-488-5628.

Sincerely,

Minister Leslie Watson Malachi, Director  
African American Ministers in Action

Rev. Jacquelyn Dupont Walker, Director  
African Methodist Episcopal Church, Social Action Commission

Rev. Paula Clayton Dempsey, Director of Partnership Relations  
Alliance of Baptists

Rev. Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins, Executive Director  
American Baptist Home Mission Societies

Shan Cretin, General Secretary  
American Friends Service Committee

David Beckmann, President  
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Rev. George Walters-Sleyon, Executive Director  
The Center for Church and Prison, Inc.

Rev. Carlos L. Malavé, Executive Director  
Christian Churches Together  
Nathan Hosler, Director, Office of Public Witness  
Church of the Brethren

Rev. Susan Taylor, National Public Affairs Director  
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Eli S. McCarthy, PhD, Director of Justice and Peace  
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Rev. H. David Schuringa, President  
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Rev. Stacy Martin, Director of Advocacy  
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Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach, Washington Office Director  
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National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

Addie Richburg, President  
National Alliance of Faith and Justice

Jim Winkler, General Secretary and President  
National Council of Churches

Rev. Ron Stief, Executive Director  
National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Sr. Simone Campbell, SSS, Executive Director  
NETWORK, a Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Reverend Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner  
Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism  
Senior Vice President, Union for Reform Judaism

Dr. Iva Carruthers, General Secretary  
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Ryan Murphy, National Organizer  
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Jim Wallis, President and Founder  
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Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Executive Director  
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Rev. Peter Morales, President  
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Rev. Geoffrey A. Black, General Minister and President  
United Church of Christ

Rev. J. Bennett Guess, Executive Minister, Local Church Ministries  
United Church of Christ

Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo, Executive Minister, Justice and Witness Ministries  
United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, General Secretary  
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

Cc: U.S. Senate and House Judiciary Committee Members