February 26, 2018
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Representative,


In 2017, 450,000 men, women, and juveniles awaited trial from inside a jail cell because they could not afford to pay their bail. Many of them are considered low-risk defendants. Of those awaiting trial, Latino men faced bail rates 19% higher than those of white men. Black men faced rates 35% higher. While the cost of posting bail is unduly punitive to poor defendants, even more daunting is the financial and familial burden caused by job loss or being absent from family life while awaiting trial in a jail cell. Congress has an obligation to ensure that people awaiting trial are not disadvantaged simply because they are too poor to afford bail.

The Pretrial Safety and Integrity Act of 2017 provides grants for states to develop alternatives to a financial-based bail system. These grants include funding for internal systems of accountability and a lawyer for every defendant on their first appearance in court. This legislation also includes funds for reporting, which will enable accountability from non-profits and faith-based and community organizations.

Reforming bail systems is a fiscally responsible choice. By reducing the number of low-risk individuals sitting in prison unable to pay their bail, we can significantly reduce the $38 million per day currently spent on incarcerating people awaiting trial.

Through our work as chaplains in countless jails and prisons and our work with re-entry programs, we see firsthand the impact unaffordable bail costs have on our brothers and sisters. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops reminds us that “Human dignity is not something we earn by our good behavior; it is something we have as children of God.” We urge you to respect the dignity and rights of those awaiting trial and support this vital legislation.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jean Denis Saint-Félix, SJ
Secretary
Office of Justice and Ecology
Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States