

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

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
United States Senate
Committee on the Judiciary
Washington, DC 20510

October 19, 2015

RE: Interfaith community supports the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, S. 2123

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Leahy:

During his speech to a joint meeting of Congress in September, Pope Francis stated that, “a good political leader is one who, with the interests of all in mind, seizes the moment in a spirit of openness and pragmatism. A good political leader always opts to initiate processes rather than possessing spaces.”

The undersigned faith organizations agree and we write to thank you, and your colleagues, for your good leadership and hard work to reach consensus on legislation that would reduce harsh sentences and end the unjust incarceration of many thousands of men and women in federal prisons. Today’s hearing before the Judiciary Committee regarding the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (S. 2123) is a critical turning point for the Committee and the Senate.

Mandatory minimum sentences have contributed to an overwhelming increase in the federal prison population since 1980. These harsh penalties are often unwarranted, particularly for low-level drug offenses, exacerbate racial disparities and perpetuate dangerous prison overcrowding. We believe S. 2123 is an important step toward fixing the federal prison crisis and we thank you for nurturing the political cooperation needed to address this often intractable problem.

Our beliefs direct us to protect the dignity and well-being of everyone impacted by the criminal justice system. That commitment extends to people who are victimized by crime, as well as to those who commit offenses. Again we take inspiration from Pope Francis’ words last month, “that a just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation.”

S. 2123’s provisions to limit federal life sentences for youth and adults are particularly commendable, and consistent with a respect for human dignity, as are its provisions to end solitary confinement for youth. We are also eager to see this legislation provide for furthering rehabilitative programming, including expanding access to treatment programs and education for those in prison.

While we object to the implementation of new mandatory minimum sentences as currently prescribed in S. 2123, we acknowledge the bill’s overall contribution to furthering a fair and proportional justice system. Our organizations look forward to working with you in the coming weeks and months to pass the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act.

Sincerely,

African American Ministers In Action
African Methodist Episcopal Church
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
Alliance of Baptists
American Baptist Home Mission Societies
American Friends Service Committee
Bend the Arc Jewish Action
Bread for the World
California Council of Churches IMPACT
Church of the Brethren, Office of Public Witness
Church of Scientology, National Affairs Office
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Disciples Center for Public Witness
Disciples Home Missions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Disciples Justice Action Network
The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Faith Action Network (Seattle, WA)
Faith in Public Life
Florida Council of Churches
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
Metropolitan Community Churches
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Alliance of Faith and Justice
National Council of Churches
National Religious Campaign Against Torture
NETWORK, National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
New Jersey Coalition of Religious Leaders
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Institute Justice Team
Sojourners
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

Cc: Senate Judiciary Committee Members, Senator Cory Booker & Senator Tim Scott