



October 19, 2015

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Leahy:

On behalf of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Charities USA, we write in support of the *Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015* (S. 2123). We welcome this modest bipartisan first step to reform our nation's broken criminal justice system and thank you for your leadership and hard work to come to an agreement.

While we find the addition of new categories of mandatory minimums problematic, we wish to highlight many of the laudatory provisions in the proposed legislation that merit support. These include among others:

- Reforms enhanced mandatory minimum sentences for prior drug felons;
- Expands "safety valves" to give judges more flexibility in sentencing;
- Counters recidivism by expanding prison-based reentry programs;
- Limits the use of solitary confinement for juveniles.

Our Catholic tradition supports the community's right to establish and enforce laws that protect people and advance the common good. But our faith also teaches us that both victims and offenders have a God-given dignity that calls for justice and restoration, not vengeance. The bishops of the United States, in their 2000 pastoral statement, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, stated: "Just as God never abandons us, so too we must be in covenant with one another. We are all sinners, and our response to sin and failure should not be abandonment and despair, but rather justice, contrition, reparation, and return or re-integration of all into the community."

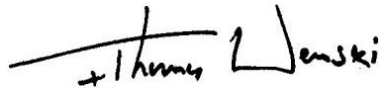
Rigid sentencing policies for non-violent offenses are costly, ineffective and can be detrimental to the good of persons, families and communities. Prolonged incarceration contributes to family instability and poverty. Those who finally leave incarceration face significant challenges upon reentering society, such as finding housing and stable employment, high rates of substance abuse, and physical and mental health challenges.

One-size-fits-all sentencing policies, such as mandatory minimums, are inadequate in addressing the complexities of crime and community safety. Instead of directing a vast amount of public resources to imprison more people and build more prisons and jails, government should support effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, as well as programs of probation, parole and reintegration.

As you consider this legislation, we ask you to work constructively to move our nation's criminal justice policies in the right direction. We urge lawmakers to resist adopting controversial changes to the bill that we would view as a step backwards and cause us to reconsider support.

In his recent talk with prisoners at the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility outside Philadelphia, Pope Francis said, "This time in your life can only have one purpose: to give you a hand in getting back on the right road, to give you hand to help you rejoin society. All of us are a part of that effort, all of us are invited to encourage, help and enable your rehabilitation." We join the Holy Father by advocating for reforms to our nation's criminal justice policies that lead to mercy, healing and restoration.

Faithfully Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Wenski". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
Archbishop of Miami
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donna J. Markham OP, PhD". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Sister Donna Markham OP, PhD
President & CEO
Catholic Charities USA