



November 20, 2018

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

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Feinstein:

On behalf of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA), and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVDP), we write to encourage you and your colleagues to pass the FIRST STEP Act (S. 3649), which we believe will improve the lives of thousands of people impacted by our federal criminal justice system.

In the present age of mass incarceration, we have called on many occasions for a criminal justice system that both does justice and is capable of restoring offenders to society. From parish ministries and diocesan programs, and Catholic Charities agencies, to the variety of ministries of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, we work with millions of people on the margins each year, tens of thousands of whom are somehow involved in the criminal justice system, including victims of crime and persons returning from prison. Many of our ministries are focused on helping returning citizens get training and employment so that, once they have served their time, they have the tools they need to make contributions to their families and their community going forward. We know that the system can do better in how it interacts with the root causes of crime, poverty, and lack of community safety. As the Church teaches:

Punishment does not serve merely the purpose of defending the public order and guaranteeing the safety of persons; it becomes as well an instrument for the correction of the offender There is a twofold purpose here. On the one hand, encouraging the re-insertion of the condemned person into society; on the other, fostering a justice that reconciles, a justice capable of restoring harmony in social relationships disrupted by the criminal act committed.¹

For years, there have been laudable efforts to reform our nation's sentencing laws and improve prison and reentry programming. The revised FIRST STEP Act (S. 3649) includes the same good measures of prison reform that were included in the previous version that was passed by the House. Notably, it requires that pregnant women not be restrained while in prison, establishes a

¹*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 403 (2004).

maximum geographical distance between prisoners and families, enhances compassionate release for terminally ill and elderly prisoners, assists returning citizens with obtaining government ID documents that will be essential in finding employment and housing, and fixes the time credit system. The centerpiece of the FIRST STEP Act is a risk assessment system that is paired with rehabilitative programming so that individuals will have opportunities to prepare to be productive members of their communities upon release.

The revised FIRST STEP Act (S. 3649) also improves upon the House version by including meaningful efforts to address unjust sentencing laws. We applaud the bipartisan efforts of Congressional leaders and the White House to ensure that this package includes sentencing reform in the form of 924(c) stacking reform, 841/851 sentencing enhancement modifications, expansion of the 3553(f) federal safety valve, and retroactive application of the Fair Sentencing Act.

The amended version of the Act also allocates additional financial resources for rehabilitative programming which will hopefully reduce wait times. The amended version also creates an independent review committee to assist the Attorney General in selecting a risk assessment tool. Racial justice is a significant priority for the Church, and ensuring that risk assessment will be done in a way that does not exacerbate already existing racial disparities in the criminal justice system is critically important.

The criminal justice system has many problems, and this bill will not solve all of them. It has taken many decades for mass incarceration and racial disparities to build up in the system, and it will take a long time for the reform that is needed to achieve a system that is truly just. This bill is a good first step in that direction. We encourage you to pass this amended version of the FIRST STEP Act (S. 3649), and to continue bipartisan work to improve and reform the criminal justice system.

Sincerely,



Most Reverend Frank J. Dewane
Bishop of Venice
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development



Sister Donna Markham, OP, Ph.D.
President & CEO
Catholic Charities USA



Mr. Ralph Middlecamp
President, National Council of the
U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul