

Statement of Debi Campbell
Submitted to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee
For the Hearing on
S. 2123, Sentencing and Corrections Act of 2015

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Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Leahy, and members of this Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Debi Campbell. I was born in Long Beach, California, and I currently live in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. I experienced the federal criminal justice system in the most personal way possible. I spent more than 16 years in federal prison for a nonviolent drug offense.

I do not have any excuses for my crime. In the early 1990s, my then-husband and I began using methamphetamine at a point in our lives when we should have known better. I am sorry to admit that I became addicted to the drug. We began selling it to others so that I could make some money. I was not a drug kingpin or major manufacturer. I just wanted extra money in the hope that it would help me keep my family together.

A woman I sold drugs to pleaded guilty and cooperated with prosecutors in exchange for a shorter sentence. I was arrested. I knew I was guilty and was going to go to prison. People who support mandatory minimum sentencing laws think that these long punishments will deter people from using or selling drugs. I can assure you that I had no idea that there were mandatory minimum sentences when I became addicted to drugs, or when I was caught. I had no idea I would face so much prison time.

Federal prosecutors charged me with a conspiracy to sell 10 kilograms of methamphetamine, a quantity based on what they had learned from the woman who pled guilty and cooperated with them. I never even saw that much drugs, much less sold it. I did not understand that my conspiracy charge meant I would be sentenced for everything my co-defendants did – and everything they said that I did. When I went to prison, I learned that I was not the only person with this misunderstanding. Many other women were doing time not just for their own mistakes, but also for the mistakes of their codefendants, partners, and other family members involved with drugs.

Even though I pled guilty and had no criminal history points under the sentencing guidelines, I received a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years, plus almost an extra decade under the then-mandatory sentencing guidelines.

In May 1994, I was sentenced to 19 years and seven months in federal prison. The woman who cooperated received probation.

I deserved to go to prison. I had broken the law. More important, I needed to go to prison because I desperately needed a wake-up call.

But I did not need nearly 20 years in prison to learn my lesson. The first few years were the toughest, and I committed myself to self improvement. I became sober, earned an associate's degree in business administration, and started on a bachelor's degree in social science. I participated in the Prison Fellowship ministry and stayed in close touch with my family. I kept my spirits up by believing I would not serve my full sentence.

But there I sat year after year, with many other women just like me. I wasted at least ten years of my life sitting in prison and taxpayers wasted hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep me there.

The worst part was not being able to be with my four daughters. I had already failed them once, and now they were growing up in the foster care system. Visits are rare for many moms in prison, and very painful. Prison time passes slowly, but children grow quickly. We wanted to get out and be better, wiser parents when our children were still young enough for it to matter. Our long sentences made that impossible. It's hard to parent on one 15-minute phone call a day. There are no more bedtime stories with kids, no helping them with their homework, no parent-teacher conferences at school. It's a lot to miss, and a lot to make up for.

There is no parole in the federal system. The only sentence reduction prisoners can earn is up to 15 percent off for good behavior. I earned the full 15 percent. I also asked to have my sentence commuted, but was denied three times. (The last rejection, from President Obama, arrived after I was already home.) I was released in 2010 after serving 16 years and one month.

Since my release, I have struggled to make up for lost time with my now adult children. I provided child care to my grandchild so that one of my daughters could pursue her own education. I volunteered with a prisoner reentry group and continued my education. I am now an advocate for all the grandmas, moms, and daughters I left behind.

Even if the bill you are considering had passed years ago, it would not have shortened my sentence. I wish that this bill went further to help more people. Congress should be repealing mandatory minimum drug sentences. But this bill will help some people in big ways, and it will help some of the women I left behind. That is a start. But it should only be a start. There is much more work to do if this bill becomes a law.

Thank you for considering my views. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have for me.