



436 14th St, Suite 920  
Oakland, CA 94612  
(415) 240-2016  
info@cut50.org

November 13, 2018

Hon. Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader

Hon. Charles Schumer  
House Minority Leader

Hon. John Cornyn  
House Majority Whip

Hon. Richard Durbin  
Senate Democratic Whip

Re: **Support for S. 2795 The FIRST STEP for Criminal Justice Reform Act**

Dear Senators McConnell, Schumer, Cornyn and Durbin:

We urge your support for the FIRST STEP Act, which would expand rehabilitative opportunities for incarcerated individuals, reduce recidivism, and promote public safety. We also strongly support the new sentencing reform provisions, which would expand judicial discretion, reduce some of the most unfair and outdated sentencing laws, and restore fairness to the justice system.

S. 2795 aligns with our goals of smart reforms that promote public safety, restore dignity to incarcerated people, and provide meaningful opportunities for successful transition back to their communities after prison. We believe that our criminal justice system must recognize the humanity of the 2.2 million people currently behind bars, heal victims, reduce crime, and move toward compassion and treatment rather than just punishment and incarceration.

We strongly believe that the provisions of S. 2795 will lead to better outcomes for individuals reintegrating back into their communities - and for society as a whole.

This bill works to improve the lives of the incarcerated men and women, their children, and their families by in the following ways:

#### **Reducing Crime by Incentivizing Rehabilitation**

When it comes to our prison system, we need to care about fairness and rehabilitation, not just punishment. The vast majority of people who are incarcerated today will be released back to society someday. It is imperative that our prisons empower them with the tools and support they need so they are able to resolve the underlying issues that led them to commit their offenses in the first place. These policies will make us all safer. The FIRST STEP Act will expand the capacity of prison programming to ensure that individuals inside can benefit from counseling, drug treatment, training and education. By participating in programming, individuals will earn credits (at a rate of 10 days for every 30 of programming) that allow them to shorten the amount of time they spend in prison and instead spend the remaining portions of their sentence in halfway houses, home confinement, or community supervision.

### **Increasing opportunities for programming and work behind the walls**

Currently, there is a significant lack of programming inside the federal prisons. S. 2795 authorizes \$50,000,000 each year for FY 2019 through 2023 (quarter of a billion), which can be used for programming. This bill also allows more outside nonprofits, volunteers and faith-based groups to go into federal prisons to provide programming and education. These volunteers will not only provide critical programming, but also will serve as mentors to those inside and be a valuable asset in changing the culture within the institutions and bringing hope and compassion to those inside.

### **Protecting Women and Facilitating Family Connections**

Currently, men and women can be housed thousands of miles away from their loved ones, left with little opportunity to maintain family bonds that are critical to successful reentry. S. 2795 will require that people living in federal prisons be housed within 500 driving miles of their families. Allowing individuals to serve their sentences in facilities closer to their family support system, maintains a healthy bond and strong ties to the community. We also support the FIRST STEP Act provisions that will end the shackling of women in labor and post-partum and provide hygiene items to women in prison at no charge. The bill also contains a fix to Prison Rape Elimination Act, which will improve how the audits of prison sexual assaults are conducted.

### **Reforming Fair Sentencing**

Currently, 49% of people in federal prison are serving sentences for drug-related offenses. For too long, our criminal justice system has been too harsh, on too many people, leaving behind broken families and devastated communities. That is why we adamantly support sentencing reform provisions that are being added to the legislation in the Senate. Sentencing reforms will help ensure that we prioritize our limited correctional resources on the people who truly threaten public safety by allowing judges the discretion to make fair sentencing decisions.

These proposed reforms address some of the harshest, most unfair, and most outdated federal sentencing laws:

- **841/851 Enhancements**: Reducing the mandatory life sentence for some third time drug offenses to 25 years and the 20-year mandatory sentences for some second-time drug offenses to 15 years.
- **924c Stacking**: Reforming the application of Section 924 (c), stopping the mandatory stacking of sentencing enhancements in cases where firearms were possessed but not used in the crime, allowing these charges to be served concurrently instead of consecutively.
- **Fair Sentencing Act Retroactivity**: bringing relief under the Fair Sentencing Act, giving approximately 3,000 people serving outdated sentences for crack cocaine charges a pathway to freedom – this works retroactively for people sentenced before 2010.
- **Safety Valve Expansion**: Broadening the “Criminal Justice History Scores” that can be considered for safety valve relief from mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses. The safety valve mechanism was created to allow courts to consider sentencing relief for those they believed incorrectly excluded by the Criminal Justice History score system. The new language strengthens the intended purpose of the safety valve by broadening the scope of eligibility, allowing judges to use their own discretion when considering the safety valve during drug sentencing.

We are in the midst of a historic moment in our nation’s long climb toward the ideal of “liberty and justice for all.” Elected leaders in Congress, from both political parties, are coming together to make meaningful progress on creating a more effective and fairer criminal justice system. Building on the success of criminal justice reforms in both Red and Blue states that have reduced crime and incarceration. But Congress has failed to pass meaningful criminal justice legislation in nearly a decade, and few improvements have come the federal prison system in more than 20 years. 186,000 people in federal prison and their family members are counting on you. The time is now to bring much-needed change.

We respectfully urge you to schedule a vote and pass the FIRST STEP Act. This legislation will undoubtedly receive strong, bipartisan support on the floor and throughout the country.

Signed,

***Jessica Jackson Sloan***  
**Co-founder of #cut50**

***Van Jones***  
**Co-founder of #cut50 and Board President of The Dream Corps**

***Tatyana Ali***  
**Actress and singer**

***Weldon Angelos***  
**Former Music Producer, Justice Reform Advocate**

***David Arquette***  
**Actor, film director, producer, screenwriter, and fashion designer**

***Christina Arquette***  
**Actress**

***Patricia Arquette***  
**Actress**

***Rosanna Arquette***  
**Actress, film director, and film producer**

***Brendon Ayanbadejo***  
**Former football linebacker**

***Mutah “Napoleon” Beale***  
**Former member of Tupac Shakur’s recording group**

***Michael Bearden***  
**Music director, keyboardist, conductor and composer**

*Aloe Blacc*

**Musician, singer, songwriter, record producer, actor, businessman**

*V. Bozeman*

**Singer, record producer and actress**

*Eric Bolling*

**Television Host and Best-Selling Author**

*Mehcad Brooks*

**Actor best known for his roles on Supergirl and Desperate Housewives**

*Scott Budnick*

**Activist and Producer of the Hangover**

*Rosa Clemente*

**American community organizer, independent journalist, and hip-hop activist**

*Courteney Cox*

**Actress, producer, and director**

*Mark Cuban*

**Owner of the Dallas Mavericks and chairman of AXS TV**

*Keith David*

**Actor best known for his roles in Platoon and Something About Mary**

*Baron Davis,*

**Former NBA All-Star, Currently a studio analyst for the NBA on TNT**

*Peter Gabriel*

**Singer-songwriter and record producer**

*Adrian Grenier*

**Actor best known for Entourage**

*Archie Gips*

**Film Producer, credits include TV series Wahlburgers**

*Seth Green*

**Actor best known for his role in the Austin Powers series**

*Marg Helgenberger*

**Actor best known for her role on CSI**

*Chelsea Handler*

**Actress, writer, television host, and producer**

*Ryan Hayden*

Actor best known for his role on **The Final**

*Kris Jenner*

Reality Show Star

*Robbie Jones*

Actor best known for his role on **One Tree Hill**

*Daniel Dae Kim*

Actor best known for his roles on **Lost** and **Hawaii 5-0**

*Simon Kinberg*

Producer best known for his work on the **X men** film franchise

*Khloe Kardashian*

Reality Show Star

*Marc Levin*

Emmy-winning Film Producer

*Louis Lombardi*

Actor starring in **Natural Born Killers**, **The Usual Suspects**, **24**, and **The Sopranos**

*Alyssa Milano*

Actress and activist

*Piper Perabo*

Film and television actress

*Luke Perry*

Actor

*Kenneth Polite*

Former United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Louisiana

*Shane Ray,*

Linebacker, **Denver Broncos**

*Jeff Ross*

Comedian

*Frostee Rucker,*

Defensive End, **Oakland Raiders**

*Esperanza Spalding*  
Singer and Jazz bassist

*Angela Stanton-King*  
Best-Selling Author, Speaker, Mentor, Publisher, Reality TV Star

*Anthony Scaramucci*  
Political consultant, Founder and Co-Managing Partner SkyBridge

*Delanie Walker,*  
Tight End, Tennessee Titans

*Isaiah Washington,*  
Actor best known for his role on Grey's Anatomy

*Benjamin Watson*  
Tight End, New Orleans Saints

*Kanye West*  
Artist

*Kim Kardashian West*  
Entrepreneur, Model and Reality Show

*Jaleel White*  
Best known for his role as Steve Urkel on Family Matters

*Steve Wyche*  
Reporter for NFL Network