



November 16, 2015

The Honorable Bob Goodlatte
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
2309 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Conyers Jr.
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
2426 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Goodlatte and Ranking Member Conyers:

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 Act of 2015* (H.R. 3713). While welcoming this proposal as a positive first step in reforming our broken sentencing laws, it is our hope that the cosponsors of this bill will remain committed to addressing broader criminal justice reform through legislation which provides programming for incarcerated individuals as well as assist them in transitioning back into their communities.

We find many of the provisions contained in the proposed legislation that merit support. These include:

- Reduce the mandatory life without parole sentence for a third drug offense to a mandatory minimum term of 25 years (retroactive);
- Reduce the mandatory minimum 20 year sentence for a second drug offense to a mandatory minimum term of 15 years (retroactive);
- Make the *Fair Sentencing Act of 2010* retroactive, allowing approximately 5,800 crack cocaine offenders to seek sentences in line with that law's reforms to the 100-to-one disparity between crack and powder cocaine mandatory minimum sentences;
- Expand drug "safety valve" exception so that nonviolent drug offenders with non-serious criminal histories can receive sentences below the mandatory minimum term (not retroactive);
- Reduce the 15-year mandatory minimum sentence to a term of 10 years for certain gun possession offenses by people with criminal records (retroactive);
- Reduce the 25-year mandatory minimum to 15 years for those who commit multiple gun possession offenses in the course of drug trafficking offenses (retroactive).

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 of crime 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, one-size-fits-all sentencing policies, such as mandatory minimums 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. These policies have proven inadequate in addressing the complexities of crime and community safety.

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. As you consider this legislation, we ask you to support policies that counter recidivism by expanding prison and community-based reentry programs, often provided by faith-based, community and local organizations. Government should support effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, as well as programs of probation instead of spending unnecessarily on incarceration.

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 a 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 style with a large, sweeping initial 'T'.

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 style with a large, sweeping initial 'D'.

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