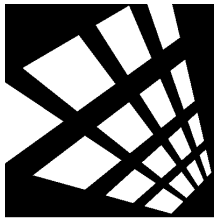


# TOOLKIT FOR FIGHTING MASS INCARCERATION IN THE 119TH CONGRESS



**THE  
SENTENCING  
PROJECT**



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## **TOOLKIT FOR FIGHTING MASS INCARCERATION IN THE 119TH CONGRESS**

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The authors are grateful to Nazgol Ghandnoosh, Joshua Rovner, and Kara Gotsch for their valuable insights and feedback.

The Sentencing Project promotes effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.

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A note from Bill Underwood

## Join my fight

In 1988, at the age of 34, I found myself on the precipice of a monumental change in my life. Convicted of participating in a drug conspiracy, I was sentenced to life without parole. After exhausting all of my appeals I realized that I would die in prison if I did not do the work to gain my freedom. I am one of the fortunate ones, I committed myself to growth and parented my children from behind bars and they became steadfast advocates for my release from federal prison.

My opportunity came through the First Step Act of 2018. A monumental bipartisan piece of federal legislation, it provided the avenue for my compassionate release in January 2021 at 67 years old. With five months of freedom under my belt, I joined The Sentencing Project as a Senior Fellow to work on the Campaign to End Life Imprisonment to advocate and create second chances for others.

As a Senior Fellow I joined the fight to advocate for an effective and humane response to crime that minimizes imprisonment. That work includes ending the collateral consequences of a conviction including voting restrictions for all Americans with felony convictions. We also work to safeguard young people from the adult criminal legal system.

I testified to Congress at a House committee hearing in 2021 on the need to reduce mandatory minimums, reform drug sentencing, address historical racial inequities, and implement second chance sentence reviews after 10 years of imprisonment. I was again called to Congress in May of 2022, and argued that the current clemency process is overly bureaucratic, inefficient, and



unjust. I explained that there were many elderly people in federal prisons, who are older and sicker than me, but have been denied clemency, compassionate release, and a second chance. I urged Congress to build on the First Step Act by passing legislation that would give more people a chance to come home and I heard from lawmakers that my perspective was valuable.

Join me in this work. I know firsthand the importance and power of advocacy. Advocacy holds Congress accountable to its constituency and the core values enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. It is the impact of this work on my life that continues to motivate me everyday to advocate for those who are being denied a second chance in an arcane and broken prison system that is ripe with corruption, abuse, and wasted potential. Together, we can remind Congress that my story should not be unique – all people are capable of change and deserve a chance at freedom.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVOCACY

## Effective advocacy for federal sentencing, guaranteeing voting rights for persons completing felony sentences inside of prison and jail, and youth justice reform starts in your own community.

Your Senators, Representatives, and their staff care about your perspective, and you can make yourself heard without ever traveling to Washington, DC. You can build meaningful relationships with Members of Congress and their staff by meeting with them virtually or in your state (often referred to as “in-district” advocacy).

The legislative process begins each session of Congress. This means that bills which did not pass in the prior session must be reintroduced and work their way through the legislative process again. The 119th Congress begins in January 2025 and ends in December 2026.

This toolkit includes tips and ideas for virtual and in-district federal advocacy to help you engage with the 119th Congress. It outlines The Sentencing Project’s sentencing, voting rights, and youth justice priorities for this session, offers a step-by-step guide for meeting with legislative staff, attending a town hall meeting, using social media and the press to advocate for reform, and includes resources to share with elected leaders. We hope this toolkit empowers you to be an active partner in our work to end extreme sentences and create second chances.

We want to support and amplify your advocacy. Please let us know how you’re using this toolkit and how we can help. Reach out to [staff@sentencingproject.org](mailto:staff@sentencingproject.org) and consult the [Get Involved](#) page of our website for more ways to engage.



# HOW TO ENGAGE IN ADVOCACY

## In Person Meetings - Meeting Your Members of Congress

### Find your Members of Congress

You can figure out who your Members of Congress are and how to contact them by using Congress.gov's "[Find Your Member](#)" tool. Enter your address and the tool will show you your Senators and Representatives. Click "Contact" under their names to be taken to their contact information on their respective websites.

### Navigating Congressional Calendars

Members of Congress spend some of their time in Washington, DC and some of their time back in their home state near their constituents, referred to as "in-district". To get a sense of when your elected officials are in DC or at home, you can consult the tentative [House of Representatives](#) and [Senate calendars](#) for 2025. Usually, members are in DC when their chamber of Congress is "in session" and home during "state work periods." You can request a meeting with members' staff at any time but if you are unable to travel to DC you can request an in-person meeting with members only when they are home. If you are seeking a meeting with DC-based staff members, they often have more availability during state work periods.

Meeting with your members of Congress or their staff in-person or remotely via a video messaging platform is an impactful way to share your story and make the case for reform. It's typically more productive to wait until a bill is introduced or reintroduced before requesting a meeting to advocate for it.

To request a meeting, you can use the contact form on your member's website. To ensure your message reaches the right person promptly, however, it's often helpful to call the member's office number and ask for the email of the relevant staff member (for instance, the member's scheduler if you're requesting a member-level meeting or the staffer who handles criminal justice matters) for your request.

You can request a meeting with your member of Congress themselves, however their time is limited. Your

request for a member-level meeting is more likely to be granted if you are requesting it on behalf of multiple constituents, especially if those constituents include formerly incarcerated individuals, their family members, or local leaders such as councilmembers, clergy, organizational leaders, or business owners. Don't be discouraged though if you're offered a meeting with a staffer instead. Staff play a key role in members' decision-making and building relationships with them is vital.

An example meeting request email is available in appendix A.

- **Prepare for the meeting.** Meetings with members or their staff are very brief, often no more than 15 minutes. Preparation is key. Practice what you're going to say and make a plan with anyone joining you. Be prepared to answer basic questions about the bill, like its status and cosponsors (both can be found by looking up the bill on Congress.gov). If possible, research your member's position on the issue in advance. For instance, if you're advocating for a bill that builds on the First Step Act, knowing whether the member voted for or against it if they were in Congress then will be helpful. Understanding the member's record will help you make the best use of your short time together.
- **Share your story.** Personal stories and connections drive policy change. If you have a loved one in prison or were incarcerated yourself, sharing your story has the power to change hearts and minds. Sharing these stories can also be stressful – practicing with a trusted friend in advance can help you figure out what you're comfortable sharing, how to do so within the allotted time, and what kind of support you may need. If you're working in a group with people from a variety of backgrounds, plan to feature the voices of those directly-impacted by the criminal legal system.
- **Have a clear, concise, and specific request.** In all of your communication with the member's office, begin by stating what you ultimately want. You can ask the member or their staff to vote for or against a specific bill or an amendment to a bill. If they already support the bill, you can ask them to be a stronger advocate for it by, for example, circulating a letter to their colleagues

urging them to also support it (this is called a “Dear Colleague” letter), advocating for it during debate, or speaking out publicly. Reiterate your request as you educate them on the issues. Remember that federal lawmakers cannot usually assist with matters of state law. For example, if you have a loved one incarcerated in a state prison for a state crime, a federal resentencing bill unfortunately will not benefit them.

- **Be respectful, patient, and assertive.** Effective advocacy requires building a relationship with a member or their staff. Interacting respectfully, even if you are urging them to change their position or expressing strong concerns, is vital regardless of whether you're meeting in-person, sending a letter, or communicating on social media.
- **Follow up the meeting with a prompt thank you that restates your request and attaches any relevant resources.** Members and their staff speak to many constituents and it can be easy to forget the details of a conversation. A well-crafted thank you email ensures that they have a resource they can reference to refresh their memory of your meeting. You can also leave materials behind to support your advocacy if you meet in person, or attach those materials to your meeting request. See appendices B and D for samples.
- **If your advocacy is successful, thank them again.** Saying thanks and publicly applauding members for doing the right thing helps build lasting productive relationships.

# Town Hall Meetings



Town Hall meetings can be a uniquely impactful way to engage with your member of Congress. Town Hall meetings are opportunities for your Congress members to hear directly from constituents about their most pressing questions and concerns and respond to them publicly, on the record. If you are directly-impacted by the federal criminal legal system, Town Halls are a powerful platform to tell your story and ask how the member is going to make a difference. For example, if you have an elderly loved one in federal prison serving a lengthy sentence, you could share about their rehabilitation and the challenges they face behind bars, and ask how your member plans to make sure that elderly people aren't needlessly incarcerated. Or if you were previously incarcerated and received a second chance, you could share how successful you've been since coming home, and ask how your member is working to create second chances for people like you.

There's also strength in numbers. Try to gather friends, family, and community members to attend the Town Hall with you to show how many people care about sentencing or youth justice reform. If your member is holding multiple Town Halls, working with allies to ensure that your shared concerns are expressed at all of the meetings can be an effective way to guarantee that your voice is heard. To find out when your members are holding Town Halls, you can check their social media, the events page of their website, or call their office.



# Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor

An Op-Ed is an essay usually published by an independent news outlet, expressing an opinion by a member of the public that makes a clear argument about a topic that has, usually, recently been in the news. For example, The Sentencing Project's Bill Underwood wrote in *USA Today* about the urgency of passing federal sentencing reform in response to Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's confirmation proceedings, which touched on federal sentencing policy.<sup>1</sup> A Letter to the Editor is a short response to a recent news article or editorial essay. For example Bill Underwood responded to a *Washington Post* piece on poor conditions in federal prisons by articulating the importance of decarceration.<sup>2</sup> Both are effective ways to influence members of Congress, as well as gain more supporters for reform. Media outlets, especially national newspapers, receive many more letters to the editor and Op-Ed submissions than they can possibly publish. Following the tips below can help ensure that your voice has a better chance of being heard.

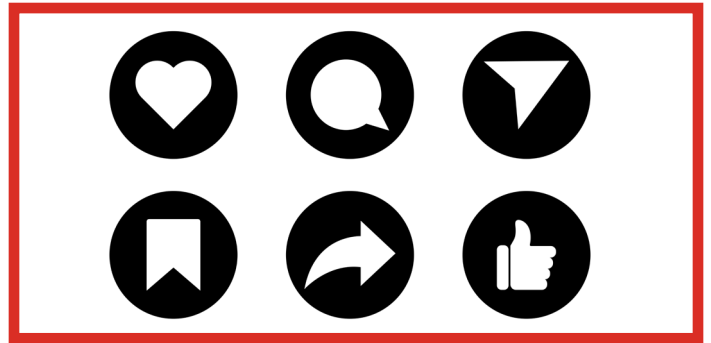
- **Be timely.** Op-Eds are more likely to be published if they are connected to current news and events. If you're writing an Op-Ed advocating for a youth justice bill, relevant timing could be an occasion like a bill's introduction, an upcoming vote on a bill, Youth Justice Action Month (October), or a holiday. Letters to the Editor should generally be submitted within a week of the story or editorial they are responding to.
- **Have a clear goal.** Just like in a meeting, it is important to include a specific request to your member of Congress, such as to support or oppose a bill.
- **Make sure your member of Congress sees the piece.** An Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor is more likely to be seen by your member of Congress if it mentions them by name. Staff monitor news for mentions of their member of Congress so including their name will make sure it ends up in their inbox. Make doubly sure they see it by emailing the published piece to their office as well.
- **Tell a story.** A narrative will help draw people in. For example, if you were writing an Op-Ed on the need to build on the First Step Act or passing the Inclusive Democracy Act, you could share a story about a loved one directly impacted by the criminal legal system.
- **Establish your authority.** Why should readers listen to your opinion? Early in the Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor establish why your opinion matters – for example, your lived experience as someone formerly incarcerated or your professional experience as a correctional officer.
- **Be accurate.** An editor will check the accuracy of facts asserted in your Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor before publishing it. If you include a fact or figure, like the number of people in federal prison or youth in detention, be prepared to provide the editor with the source of that information if they move forward with your Op-Ed.
- **Meet requirements.** Newspapers typically have a firm word count range for Op-Eds, typically between 600-800 words. Letters to the editor are much shorter – often about 250 words or less. Newspapers usually specify how they prefer to receive Op-Eds and letters, such as an online form or a specific email address. If you can't find this information on their website, you can call and ask for their Op-Ed and Letter to the Editor guidelines and submission preferences.
- **Choose the right outlet.** Your member of Congress will be influenced by Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor published by newspapers within their state or nationally (such as *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, or *The Washington Post*). You can also pitch publications focused on federal politics (for example, *The Hill*).

To learn more about submitting an effective Op-Ed, consider consulting these guides from [The Washington Post](#) and [The Op-Ed Project](#).

# Speak Out Online

**Social media can be an effective tool for advocacy. Here are some tips to help you make an impact:**

- Directly tag your representative with their username on any social media platform to make sure they see your posts.
- Note that you're a constituent. Representatives are more likely to engage with people in their district.
- Include a clear ask, such as supporting or opposing a bill, and state your reason – such as explaining your connection to this issue. You can also ask a general question, like “How are you working to build on the First Step Act?” or “How is Congress guaranteeing ballot access for eligible incarcerated voters?” to start a conversation and get an individualized response.
- Offer to discuss the topic further to encourage building a dialogue.
- Be polite. Courtesy over social media is just as crucial as it is in-person.
- Amplify resources on sentencing, voting rights, and youth justice reform. For examples, check out The Sentencing Project's accounts on Instagram, @TheSentencingProject, and X.com, @SentencingProj.



## The Power of Faith-based Advocacy

Does your faith community have a prison visitation ministry? Or an anti-death penalty ministry? Consider adding extreme sentencing, voting rights, and youth justice reform advocacy to that important work. Clergy and faith communities can play a powerful role in moving members of Congress toward reform. Organizing within religious communities can also be a highly efficient way to take collective action. For example, your prison ministry group could request a meeting with your member of Congress, attend a Town Hall together, and send letters. In Appendix C, you can see a letter that members of a prayer group at a church in North Carolina sent to their Senator, urging him to co-sponsor the Safer Detention Act after learning about the plight of an elderly man who will die in prison unless Congress makes him eligible for compassionate release.

Members of the clergy can pitch Op-Eds or collaborate with colleagues at other faith communities to send powerful group letters and request meetings. In your faith-based advocacy, don't hesitate to use the rhetoric of your faith or to cite scripture – that's what makes your voice unique and valuable. Many faith communities or religious denominations also have detailed advocacy resources of their own which provide further guidance for effective advocacy, some of which are available in Appendix D.

# SENTENCING, VOTING RIGHTS, AND YOUTH JUSTICE REFORM PRIORITIES FOR THE 119TH CONGRESS

## SENTENCING BILLS

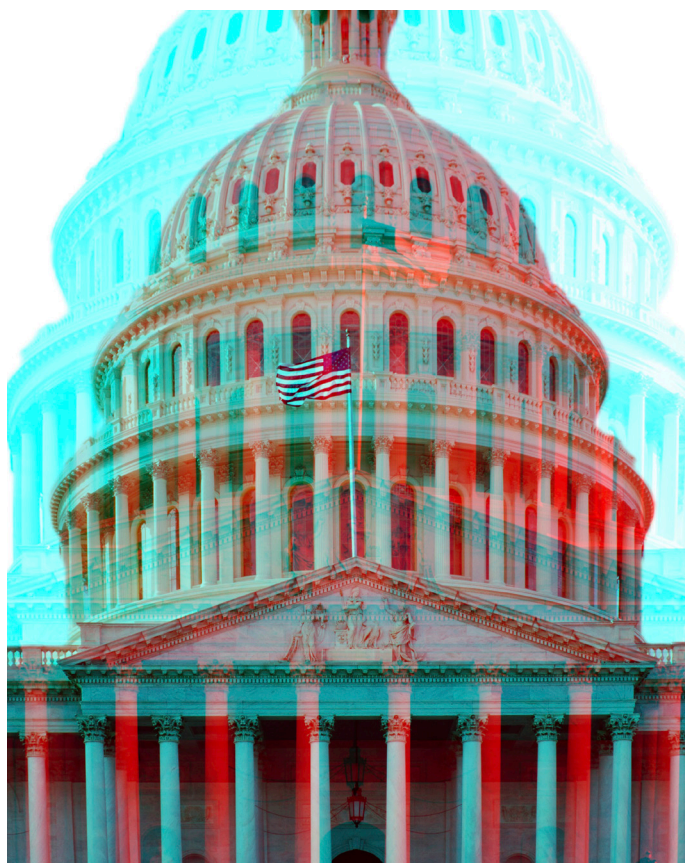
### Building on the First Step Act

The Safer Detention Act<sup>3</sup> and the First Step Implementation Act<sup>4</sup> are bipartisan bills that would build on the success of the First Step Act and fill key gaps, including making key reforms retroactive and ensuring that elderly people have access to the opportunity for early release, if appropriate.

#### ***Pass the First Step Implementation Act and the Safer Detention Act***

In 2018, Congress passed, and President Donald Trump signed into law, the bipartisan First Step Act, a sweeping criminal justice reform bill designed to promote rehabilitation, lower recidivism, and reduce excessive sentences in the federal prison system. Lawmakers and advocates across both political parties supported the bill as a necessary step to address extreme and unjust sentences imposed in the 1980s and 1990s. The First Step Act includes a range of sentencing reforms, including expanded opportunities for individuals to receive reduced sentences if they participate in rehabilitative programming. It also allows individuals to go before a judge and seek a reduction in sentence based on extraordinary circumstances, commonly called “compassionate release.” The First Step Act has been overwhelmingly successful. Among the over 44,000 individuals whose release has been expedited by the First Step Act,<sup>5</sup> nearly nine in every 10 have not been rearrested or reincarcerated, a recidivism rate considerably lower than the general prison population.

The Safer Detention Act would expand opportunities for early release from prison for elderly people who pose no threat to public safety. While criminological research shows that people age out of crime as they grow older, extreme prison sentences continue to incarcerate people into old age well after they have demonstrated readiness to successfully reenter society. Some of the oldest and most medically vulnerable people in federal prisons – those convicted of offenses that occurred prior to November 1, 1987 – were inadvertently excluded from



seeking a reduction in sentence under the First Step Act. The Safer Detention Act would correct that drafting error and make over 150 “old law” individuals eligible to seek compassionate release.<sup>6</sup> To better ensure the health and safety of elderly incarcerated individuals, the Safer Detention Act would also reauthorize the Elderly Home Detention Pilot Program, which permits elderly individuals convicted of low-level non-violent offenses to return home sooner. Thus far, 1,245 individuals have benefited from the Elderly Home Detention Pilot Program.<sup>7</sup>

The First Step Implementation Act, builds upon the First Step Act of 2018’s reduction of mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses. It would reduce inequities in the First Step Act’s implementation by making several of the law’s sentencing reforms retroactive to bring previously imposed sentences up to date with current sentencing law. It would also grant judges greater discretion to sentence below mandatory minimums when they find those sentences excessive, bringing greater fairness to the federal justice system. It would also empower judges to reduce sentences imposed on people convicted of crimes as minors who have served more than 20 years. Long sentences impede public investments in effective crime prevention, substance use treatment, and other rehabilitative efforts that produce healthier and safer communities. The First Step Implementation Act would potentially allow nearly 7,000 individuals in federal prisons to seek a reduction in sentence, and result in lower sentences for nearly 800 people per year.<sup>8</sup>

## Creating Second Look Opportunities

### ***Pass the Second Look Act***

Many individuals remain in federal prisons decades longer than is necessary to protect communities or hold them accountable – needlessly fracturing families, denying them a chance to contribute to the community, and wasting scarce correctional resources. Legal experts recommend taking a second look at prison sentences after people have served 10 to 15 years, to ensure that sentences reflect society’s evolving norms and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The American Law Institute,<sup>10</sup> the American Bar Association,<sup>11</sup> and Council on Criminal Justice’s Federal Prior-

ities Task Force<sup>12</sup> have endorsed sentence reviews after 10-15 years of imprisonment while jurisdictions such as the District of Columbia have begun to implement second looks for selective portions of their prison population.<sup>13</sup>

The Second Look Act<sup>14</sup> would allow individuals in federal prisons who have served at least 10 years in prison to petition a federal court for a sentence reduction. The court could reduce the individual’s sentence if the judge found that the individual is not a threat to public safety, is ready for reentry, and the interests of justice warrant a sentence modification. The bill also creates a rebuttable presumption of release for a defendant who is 50 years of age or older on the date of the petition. While not a guarantee of relief, the Second Look Act would give a hope of reentering the community to all individuals in federal prison.

## End Racial Disparity in Sentencing

### ***Pass the EQUAL Act***

In 1986, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, establishing mandatory minimum sentences triggered by specific quantities of cocaine. Congress mandated much tougher sentences for crack cocaine offenses than for powder cocaine cases. For example, distribution of just 5 grams of crack carried a minimum 5-year federal prison sentence, while for powder cocaine, distribution of 500 grams – 100 times the amount of crack cocaine – carried the same sentence. The harsh mandatory minimums for crack cocaine, more prevalent in Black communities, contributed to rising incarceration rates and racial disparities in the federal criminal legal system.<sup>15</sup>

The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 reduced the disparity in sentencing for crack cocaine and powder cocaine offenses from 100:1 to 18:1, an improvement, but still an unscientific and racially-biased distinction. The bipartisan EQUAL Act<sup>16</sup> would finally end the disparity between crack and powder cocaine offenses. Passage of the EQUAL Act would significantly improve fairness, proportionality, and racial justice within the federal criminal legal system.

Extreme federal penalties for crack cocaine have persisted for decades despite an abundance of evidence from the medical and scientific community that no significant differences between crack cocaine and powder cocaine exist that justify the sentencing disparity between two forms of the same drug. The EQUAL Act would bring the federal justice system more in line with the vast majority of states that do not punish crack and powder cocaine differently.<sup>17</sup>

According to estimates from the U.S. Sentencing Commission, over 7,600 people in federal prisons would likely receive a reduction in sentence if the EQUAL Act were passed – going from an average sentence of 173 months to 100 months. And over 800 people facing federal crack cocaine charges each year would benefit from the EQUAL Act.<sup>18</sup>

## VOTING BILLS

### Guaranteeing Voting Rights for Justice Impacted Voters

#### *Inclusive Democracy Act*

The Inclusive Democracy Act<sup>19</sup> would allow all currently and formerly incarcerated people to cast ballots in federal elections. All citizens should be allowed a voice in our democracy.

The Inclusive Democracy Act includes several provisions designed to guarantee voting rights. Provisions include automatic restoration of voting rights in federal elections to all Americans with felony convictions; and elimination of state-level barriers that prevent individuals with criminal convictions - incarcerated or after release - from exercising their right to vote in federal elections.

Many of the laws linking voting rights to an individuals' history with the criminal justice system have their roots in Jim Crow era policies<sup>20</sup> which were explicitly designed to deny the right to vote to Black and Brown people, including poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and cross burnings. As a result of these outdated policies, 4 million Americans with a felony conviction were disenfranchised as of 2024, disproportionately impacting Black and Latinx Americans. Polling from Lake Research Partners<sup>21</sup> found that a majority of voters (56%) would support a law guaranteeing the eligibility to vote for all citizens 18 and older, including citizens completing their sentence, both inside and outside of prison.

The Sentencing Project is working to pass the Inclusive Democracy Act and all legislation<sup>22</sup> that guarantees voting rights for otherwise eligible voters in federal elections regardless of criminal conviction status.



# YOUTH JUSTICE BILLS

## Support Youth Justice Reform

### ***Reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act***

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJ-DPA) was signed into law in 1974 and was most recently reauthorized in 2018 with bipartisan support. JJ-DPA is the United States' main federal law governing state juvenile justice systems. The JJ-DPA established the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), which is charged with supporting local and state efforts to prevent youth crime and improve their respective juvenile justice systems. OJJDP provides funds to states that follow a set of core federal protections for youth in the justice system. The JJ-DPA is currently up for reauthorization, meaning that Congress previously authorized funding for 2019 through 2023 and must act to approve future funding. In September 2024, Senators Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and Charles Grassley (R-IA) introduced the Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2024 (JJ-DPRA).<sup>23</sup>

The JJ-DPRA of 2024 provides several updates to the JJ-DPA and reauthorizes the Act for another five years. The JJ-DPRA would give greater flexibility to states to use funds to address their local needs. It also ensures that the JJ-DPA's core protections apply to youth housed in adult prisons. Those four core protections include ensuring youth who merely commit non-criminal "status offenses" (such as chronic truancy or breaking curfew) are not institutionalized, removing youth from adult jails and prisons, fully separating youth (from the "sight and sound" of detained adults) when they are held in the same or adjacent facilities, and addressing racial and ethnic disparities of youth at all points in the juvenile justice system. It would also phase out the Valid Court Order exception, which allows states to incarcer-

ate youth for status offenses if they violate the terms of their probation. Finally, it would close a loophole which allowed some facilities in states which do not meet the four core protections to receive funding.

The Sentencing Project is working to reauthorize the JJ-DPA as a member of the Act 4 Juvenile Justice (Act4jj) coalition. For more information on the history of the JJ-DPA and reauthorization visit [Act4jj.org](https://act4jj.org).



# APPENDIX A

# SAMPLE MEETING REQUEST

## Official Letterhead (if applicable)

**[Date]**

ATTENTION: [scheduler name]

The Honorable [Senator or Representative Name]  
United States [Senate or House of Representatives]  
[District Office Address]

Dear [Senator or Representative]:

I am writing [on behalf of your group/organization/faith community if relevant] to request an appointment to meet with you in your district office during the week of [dates] to urge you to support [bill name]. If it will not be possible to meet in person, we would like to schedule a meeting via video chat. If you are unavailable, we would like to meet with a key member of your staff who handles criminal justice issues.

[If you are reaching out on behalf of an organization, describe the organization in two to three sentences, including how sentencing reform, voting rights, or youth justice is relevant to the organization's interests.]

I urge you to support [bill name] because [describe in two to three sentences, including your personal connection to the bill if relevant].

I will call your office to follow up on scheduling an appointment. I hope that we will have the opportunity to speak soon. If I can provide you with additional information or assistance, please contact me at [email and phone number].

Sincerely,

[Name]

*Include as attachments the text of the bill and the summary.*

# APPENDIX B

# SAMPLE THANK YOU AND FOLLOW UP

Official Letterhead (if applicable)

[Date]

ATTENTION: [staff member that you met with]

The Honorable [Senator or Representative Name]  
United States [Senate or House of Representatives]  
[District Office Address]

Dear [Senator or Representative]:

We appreciate [you or name of staff] meeting with [organization or names of individuals] on [date] to talk about guaranteeing the right to vote in federal elections for justice impacted citizens, particularly the urgency of supporting [bill].

**Or**

We were glad to have the opportunity to provide you with information about the importance of ending extreme sentences. As we discussed during our conversation with [you or name of staff], [remind them of why this bill is important to you as a constituent].

We have attached additional information on [bill] and if we can provide you with further information or assistance, please let us know at [email and phone number]. We urge you to support [bill].

Sincerely,

[Name]

*Include as attachments the bill text, a summary, and, if relevant, additional materials from Appendix D.*



# APPENDIX C

# EXAMPLE FAITH-BASED LETTER TO CONGRESS MEMBER

*This example letter was sent by a faith group in North Carolina to Senator Tillis.*

October 18, 2023

The Honorable Thom Tillis  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

**Re: Christians urge support for expansion of compassionate release**

Dear Senator Tillis:

As your constituents and as Christians, we are grateful for your sentencing reform leadership and write to urge you to build on that legacy by co-sponsoring the Safer Detention Act of 2023. All people in prison are children of God: deserving of mercy and capable of redemption. Compassionate release reflects that reality, but currently some of the oldest and sickest people in federal prisons are excluded from that relief. The Safer Detention Act would correct that cruel injustice and we urge you to support it.

Far too many elderly people are in federal prisons. Many are ill, going blind, experiencing dementia, and have long since ceased to pose a risk to the community. As Christians, we are called to “remember the prisoner” (Hebrew 13:3). We urge you to remember these vulnerable men and women.

This [recent New York Times profile](#) tells the story of one such man, Bonnie Erwin, who despite being partially paralyzed and using a wheelchair, is unable to seek compassionate release.

Currently, people convicted of offenses that occurred prior to November 1, 1987 are arbitrarily excluded from compassionate relief. These few hundred men and women are among the most vulnerable in federal prisons, and many are serving sentences far longer than they would receive today.

Our faith calls us to temper justice with mercy. The Safer Detention Act would bring compassionate release closer to that ideal by granting judges much needed discretion to reunite families, save lives, and correct injustice for these forgotten individuals.

Again, thank you for your leadership on these issues and for your attention to the concerns we’ve expressed here. We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you. Please contact [redacted name at redacted phone number and email address] to arrange a meeting.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

# APPENDIX D

# BUILDING ON THE FIRST STEP ACT

## ***Building on the First Step Act***

These resources on the First Step Act and the need for further reforms can be useful to share with legislative offices in follow up emails or to leave behind after in-person meetings if you are advocating for the First Step Implementation Act or Safer Detention Act.

[The First Step Act: Ending Mass Incarceration in Federal Prison](#), The Sentencing Project - *Brief summarizing the successes and limitations of the First Step Act, recidivism rates for beneficiaries, and the need for further reform*

[The First Step Act: An Early Analysis of Recidivism](#), The Council on Criminal Justice - *Detailed analysis of the recidivism rates of beneficiaries of the First Step Act*

[Estimated Impact of the First Step Implementation Act of 2021](#), U.S. Sentencing Commission - *Breakdown of how many individuals would likely benefit from each provision of the First Step Implementation Act and the years of incarceration it would reduce*

[Saving the People Congress Forgot: It Is Time to Abolish the U.S. Parole Commission and Consider All “Old Law” Federal Prisoners for Release](#), Federal Sentencing Reporter - *Academic article offering background on the need for the Safer Detention Act, as well as further reforms, in order to decrease the necessary incarceration of some of the oldest individuals in federal prisons*

## ***Creating Second Chances***

These resources on sentencing second looks can be useful to share with legislative offices in follow up emails or to leave behind after in-person meetings if you are advocating for the Second Look Act.

[A Second Look at Injustice](#), The Sentencing Project - *Report detailing the role of extreme sentences in driving racial disparities and mass incarceration and discusses the research supporting sentencing second looks.*

[The Second Look Movement: A Review of the Nation’s Sentence Review Laws](#), The Sentencing Project - *Report summarizing the growing movement amongst states to pass resentencing laws.*

## ***Ending the Disparity***

These resources on ending the cocaine sentencing disparity can be useful to share with legislative offices in follow up emails or to leave behind after in-person meetings if you are advocating for the EQUAL Act.

[The EQUAL Act: Why Congress Must #EndTheDisparity Between Federal Crack & Powder Cocaine Sentences](#), FAMM - *Brief summary of the EQUAL Act and its potential impact.*

[Federal Crack Cocaine Disparity Myth-Buster](#), Prison Fellowship - *Two-page document dispelling common myths about crack cocaine, racial disparities, and reform.*

## ***Resources for Faith-based Sentencing Advocacy***

These documents and toolkits are just a small selection of the resources created by faith organizations to support faith-based lobbying and may be helpful to individuals or faith communities engaging in faith-based advocacy.

[How to Lobby Congress Virtually: A Step-by-Step Guide](#), Friends Committee on National Legislation - *Guide developed by a national, nonpartisan Quaker organization to support virtual advocacy.*

[Lobbying Resources](#), NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice - *Guide to lobbying lawmakers by phone, in-person, on social media, and in the media for Catholic advocates.*

[Creating Change Together: A Toolkit for Faithful Civic Engagement](#), General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church - *Detailed advocacy resource, including guidance on storytelling, in-person and remote advocacy, and public witness.*

[Handbook for Jewish Communities Fighting Mass Incarceration](#), T'ruah - *Comprehensive guide for Jewish communities and leaders interested in fighting mass incarceration with extensive background materials, religious resources, and advocacy guidance.*

[Lobbying Guide for Houses of Worship](#), Bolder Advocacy - *Brief summary of the legal limits governing lobbying by churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith communities.*

[Outrageous Justice](#), Prison Fellowship - *A six-week small group Christian curriculum on the need for criminal legal reform and opportunities for advocacy.*

### **Youth Justice Reform Resources**

These resources on the JJDPR created by the Act4JJ coalition can be useful to share with legislative offices in follow up emails or to leave behind after in-person meetings. For additional resources and action alerts, visit the [Act4JJ website](#).

[Section-by-Section Summary of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2024](#), Act4JJ Coalition - *A section by section review of the provisions of the JJDPR.*

[Summary Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2024](#), Act4JJ Coalition - *A one page summary of the JJDPR.*

### **Guaranteeing Voting Rights Resources**

These materials support rights restoration advocacy and will be helpful to share with legislative offices in support of guaranteeing voting rights for citizens with felony convictions.

[Out of Step: U.S. Policy on Voting Rights in Global Perspective](#) - *This report highlights the outlier status of the United States of stripping voting rights from citizens with felony convictions.*

[Expanding the Vote: State Felony Disenfranchisement Reform, 1997-2023](#) - *This report documents that as of 2023, 26 states and the District of Columbia expanded voting rights to persons with felony convictions since 1997.*

[Increasing Public Safety by Restoring Voting Rights](#) - *The research highlighted in this briefing paper underscores the beneficial impacts of restoring voting rights for all Americans who have been convicted of a felony, whether they are inside or outside of prison.*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Underwood, W. (2022). One of us was a prisoner. The other was a guard. It's clear to both of us we need reform. USA Today.

<sup>2</sup> Underwood, W. (2023). The best way to reform prisons is to reduce their populations. Washington Post.

<sup>3</sup> Safer Detention Act of 2023. S.1248.

<sup>4</sup> The First Step Implementation Act of 2023. S.1251.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Justice (2024). The First Step Act Annual Report.

<sup>6</sup> Weisselberg, C. & Evans, L. (2022). Saving the people Congress forgot: It is time to abolish the U.S. Parole Commission and consider all 'old law' federal prisoners for release. Federal Sentencing Reporter 35, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Federal Bureau of Prisons (2024). First Step Act.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Sentencing Commission (2021). Estimate of the impact of selected sections of S. 1014, the First Step Act Implementation Act of 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Ghandnoosh, N. (2021). A second look at injustice. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>10</sup> American Law Institute. (2021). Model Penal Code: Sentencing. Prepublication Draft, pp. 338, 797.

<sup>11</sup> American Bar Association (2022). Resolution 502. Also in 2022, the ABA adopted Resolution 604, which, among other things, urged the adoption of "second look" policies, requiring review of sentences of incarceration at designated times to determine if they remain appropriate. American Bar Association (2022). ABA Nine Principles on Reducing Mass Incarceration, Resolution 604 (2022). See also Robert, A. (2022, August 8). ABA Provides 10 Principles for Ending Mass Incarceration and Lengthy Prison Sentences. ABA Journal.

<sup>12</sup> Council on Criminal Justice (2022) . An Agenda for Federal Action on Safety and Justice.

<sup>13</sup> Ghandnoosh, N. (2021). A second look at injustice. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>14</sup> The Second Look Act of 2024. S. 5396.

<sup>15</sup> Nellis, A. (2024). How Mandatory Minimums Perpetuate Mass Incarceration and What to Do About It. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>16</sup> The Equal Act of 2023. S. 524.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g., SB 1154, 118th Sess. (S.C. 2010); HB 86, §1, 129th Gen. Assem. (Ohio 2011); SB 1010, 2013-14 Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2014); SB 1005, 436th Gen. Assem. (Md. 2016).

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Sentencing Commission (2022). Estimate of the Impact of H.R. 1693. The EQUAL Act of 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Inclusive Democracy Act of 2023. H.R. 6643

<sup>20</sup> Staples, B. (2024). States are Finally Giving Released Prisoners a Fundamental Right. *The New York Times*.

<sup>21</sup> The Sentencing Project. (2022). New National Poll shows Majority Favor Guaranteed Right to Vote for All.

<sup>22</sup> The Sentencing Project supports The Democracy Restoration Act of 2023, H.R. 4987. The DRA would restore voting rights in federal elections to all non-incarcerated persons with felony convictions.

<sup>23</sup> Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2024. S.5250.



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