



Support the REDEEM Act to Protect and Restore Lives

March 5, 2015

Dear U.S. Senator:

The Sentencing Project, which for over 25 years has conducted research and advocacy to create fairer and more effective criminal and juvenile justice systems, strongly supports the bipartisan REDEEM Act, to be introduced by Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Rand Paul (R-KY). This legislation would help to protect and restore the lives of individuals who have had contact with the criminal or juvenile justice system, while reducing recidivism. While the legislation could be improved and strengthened, the REDEEM Act would put in place several important reforms to promote both justice and public safety. We therefore urge the Senate to approve this important measure.

Partially Repeal the Felony Drug Ban

Among other important provisions, the REDEEM Act would partially repeal the felony drug ban, which imposes a lifetime restriction on welfare and food stamp benefits for anyone convicted of a state or federal drug felony. Enacted during the “tough on crime” period of the 1990s, the ban denies basic assistance to people who may have sold a small amount of marijuana years or even decades ago and have been law-abiding citizens ever since.

The Sentencing Project found that the felony drug ban subjects an estimated 180,000 women in the 12 most impacted states to a lifetime ban on welfare benefits. People who cannot meet basic needs may be more likely to turn to dangerous activities. A study by researchers at Yale Medical School found that women who are denied food assistance due to a drug conviction are at greater risk of hunger. These women are also more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior such as prostitution in order to get money for food.

Furthermore, given racial disparities throughout the criminal justice system, banning benefits based on a prior drug conviction has brutally unfair consequences for people of color. Of those individuals serving time for drug offenses, about two-thirds are black or Latino. Blacks are three to four times more likely to be arrested for drug offenses than whites, even though they use and sell drugs at roughly the same rates.

Though the legislation could go much further — for example, by also lifting restrictions on housing and education benefits — the repeal of the felony drug ban is a good first step toward restoring access to assistance for individuals who urgently need it.

Improve Treatment of Young People in Juvenile Justice

In addition, the REDEEM Act makes necessary improvements to the treatment of young people who encounter the juvenile justice system. The juvenile justice system was founded on the principle of enhanced confidentiality for youth wrongdoing, but over time this principle has given way to strategies that make the system more transparent. This leaves youth who make mistakes, sometimes very minor ones, vulnerable to a lifetime of consequences. The REDEEM Act's provision for sealing juvenile records restores the juvenile justice system to its original intention. The REDEEM Act's second juvenile justice provision deals with solitary confinement, a timely issue that has been addressed in some states but in many others it has not. The components of the solitary confinement portion of the bill set a high bar for states to follow and are commendable by justice and human rights standards.

The Sentencing Project believes that the passage of the REDEEM Act would help returning citizens safely reenter society and begin new lives. It would restore a measure of justice and fairness to the criminal and juvenile justice systems while promoting better outcomes that improve public safety. We therefore strongly support this legislation and urge you to vote in favor of the REDEEM Act.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Marc Mauer", written in a cursive style.

Marc Mauer
Executive Director