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Senator Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Charles Schumer  
Senate Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator John Cornyn  
Majority Whip  
United States Senate  
517 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Dick Durbin  
Senate Democratic Whip  
United States Senate  
711 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington DC 20510

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

Dear Senators Mitch McConnell, John Cornyn, Charles Schumer, and Dick Durbin,

We write to you today to urge your support and an immediate vote for S. 2795, The FIRST STEP Act.

We envision a criminal justice system that recognizes the humanity of the 2.2 million people currently behind bars in America and moves toward compassion and treatment rather than punishment and incarceration. S. 2795 falls in line with our mission by improving the conditions for incarcerated individuals, reducing the amount of time people spend in prison, and provide meaningful opportunities to successfully transition into their communities.

We are encouraged by strong support from both Republicans and Democrats on criminal justice legislation. Specifically, we credit Senators John Cornyn and Sheldon Whitehouse for coming together to introduce the FIRST STEP Act. In the House, Reps. Hakeem Jeffries and Doug Collins worked in a bipartisan fashion to greatly improve this bill over earlier versions and pass it with overwhelming support from both parties by a vote of 360-59 - including Aye votes from all GOP and Democratic party leadership. Critical to this process has been the input and support of formerly incarcerated individuals with lived experiences through the federal prison system.

In 2015, 3 out of 10 federal prisoners and 6 out of 10 state prisoners released to a term of community supervision returned to prison within 5 years.<sup>1</sup> Far too many struggle with unemployment, housing instability, and substance addiction when they come home. Many have difficulty overcoming the trauma they experienced during their incarceration and reestablishing ties to family and community that were damaged by their incarceration. We strongly believe that the provisions of S. 2795 will lead to better outcomes for individuals reintegrating back into their communities. Establishing a system that provides guidance and intensity of evidenced-based recidivism reduction programming will provide the necessary resources for individuals to prepare for release.

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

### **Reducing the number of people incarcerated in federal prisons**

This bill will immediately make over four thousand people in federal prison eligible for early release - by fixing a good time credit calculation retroactively. Men and women in incarcerated federal prison will earn nearly 8 weeks (54 days) per year off of their sentence for good time. Thousands more will soon become eligible to move from Bureau of Prisons facilities into home detention as a result of the expansion of the elderly prisoner pilot program - which gives people 60 years or older who have served more than 2/3 of their sentence an opportunity to serve the remainder of their sentence on home confinement.

The bill 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 participating in programming) that allow them to shorten the amount of time they spend in prison and release back to their communities and families sooner - via expanded use of home confinement. It provides a pathway to prerelease for even those deemed “high” or “medium” risk.

### **Increasing opportunities for programming and work within 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. 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.

The bill also expands work programs so that those inside have an opportunity to work and save money in escrow accounts that they can use as they return home to get back on their feet. S. 2795 also creates an ID program so that men and women returning to society have identification necessary to gain benefits, housing, and employment.

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<sup>1</sup> Markman, J.A., M.R. Durose, R.R. Rantala, and A.D. Tiedt (2016). Recidivism of Offenders Placed on Federal Community Supervision in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

### **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 familial relationships that are critical to both their well being while inside and 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.

In the last two decades, the women's prison population has risen by 700%. Our prisons and policies were not designed to meet women's needs and the result has been a system that traumatizes and endangers women. The FIRST STEP Act will end the shackling of women in labor and post-partum. Shackling pregnant women is dangerous and inhumane. The shackling of pregnant women endangers the lives of the mother and fetus. S. 2795 sends a clear message of responsibility for the health and safety of both the mother and the fetus during pregnancy by banning the use of shackles. It will also provide hygiene items to women in prison at no charge and expand phone and visitation time that are vital to the rehabilitation process and to allowing the 80% of women who are mothers in prison stay connected to their children. The bill also contains a fix to Prison Rape Elimination Act, which will improve how the audits of prison rape incidents are conducted.

### **Providing Meaningful Oversight to Help Ensure Proper Implementation**

S. 2795 will also place additional layers of accountability and oversight within the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Additionally, there will be an annual accountability report to ensure that the risk assessment tool is being administered in an unbiased way. This is crucial as we continue to face vast racial disparities that negatively impact African American and Latino communities.

These are meaningful reforms. This is our best chance to pass this bill into law and dramatically change the lives of people inside - and expand accountability and oversight of the federal prison system.

The passage of S. 2795 will truly be the first step towards further progress that we hope will eventually include sentencing reform. #cut50, on behalf of the undersigned organizations and individuals, respectfully urge you to schedule a vote on this legislation and vote yes in support.

Sincerely,

***Jessica Jackson Sloan***

**Co-founder of #cut50**

***Van Jones***

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

### **Supporting organizations:**

1. Aleph Institute

2. American Conservative Union
3. Anjali Sawhney Life Coach
4. Anti-Recidivism Coalition
5. Ardella House
6. Austin Reentry Advocacy Project
7. Black Educational Achievement Movement
8. Butterfly Life Journeys
9. Campaign for Black Male Engagement
10. CAN-DO Foundation
11. Central Arkansas ReEntry (CARE) Coalition
12. Central Illinois All of Us or None
13. Cities United
14. Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending
15. Civil Survival
16. Council of State Governments Justice Center
17. Darrell Padgett
18. Dave's Killer Bread Foundation
19. Dawud Bey / Do4Self + Fine Print
20. Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE)
21. Drive Change NYC
22. Ella Baker Center
23. EMIT End incarceration Together
24. Empower Missouri
25. Eric Sterling
26. Faith and Freedom
27. Families Against Mandatory Minimums
28. Flikshop
29. Foglight Strategies
30. FreedomWorks
31. From Prison Cells to PhD
32. Gathering for Justice/Justice League NYC
33. Girls Embracing Mothers (GEM)
34. Greenburger Center
35. Hands of Hope Ministries
36. Healing Communities USA
37. IMSI Hope Community Phase II
38. Inmate Support
39. Isabell Murray from #KidsNotCriminals
40. John Howard Association
41. Just Detention USA
42. Kansas Appleseed
43. Koch
44. Ladies of Hope Ministries
45. MADE Transitional Services
46. Malta Justice Initiative
47. Maryland Justice Project
48. Michigan United

49. Minnesota Second Chance Coalition
50. Nation of Second Chances
51. Nation Outside
52. National Incarceration Association
53. National Urban League
54. Norman Brown
55. Obodo
56. Ohio Association of Formerly Incarcerated Offenders
57. Ohio Justice and Policy Center
58. Operation New Hope
59. Operation Restoration
60. Osborne Association
61. Prisology
62. Prison Fellowship
63. Prison Professors L.L.C.
64. Project Liberation
65. Project Restart Reentry
66. PROJECT RESTORE BMORE
67. Project Return
68. Promise of Justice Initiative
69. Public Defender Association
70. Real Cost of Prisons Project
71. RecycleForce
72. Reentry Campus Program
73. Reentry Central
74. Reinventing Reentry
75. Restore HER
76. Right On Crime
77. ROC Wisconsin
78. Root and Rebound
79. Sex Workers and Allies Network
80. Shaka Senghor
81. Shelton McElroy
82. Shepherd's Fold
83. SOAR Career Solutions
84. Soteria
85. Systemic Change of Idaho
86. Texas Criminal Justice Coalition
87. Texas Public Policy Foundation
88. The Last Mile
89. The Living Harvest
90. The Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership (LARRP)
91. The Return Project and Big Pictures
92. The Southern Center for Human Rights
93. The WIRE (Women Involved in Reentry Efforts)
94. Toni Bunton Endeavors, LLC
95. Unlabeled Digital Media

96. Urban League of Greater Atlanta
97. US Justice Action Network
98. Vinny Schiraldi, Columbia Justice Lab
99. VOTE NOLA
100. Weldon Angelos
101. What's Next Washington
102. Women on the Rise
103. Women Who Never Give Up
104. Women With A Vision
105. Women's Prison Association