

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,
Hearing on “Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015”
October 19, 2015**

The problems facing our criminal justice system simply cannot continue to go unaddressed. When we lock up too many people, for longer than is necessary to keep our communities safe – it comes at an extraordinary price. We have fewer resources to support public safety efforts that actually work. And we are left with a criminal justice system that is anything but “just,” particularly for many communities of color.

To solve complex problems in our communities, like addiction, Congress has too often resorted to simple, yet deeply flawed mandatory minimum sentences. It is time we fix our mistakes. And it is essential that this fix apply retroactively – so that those currently paying the price for our mistakes are given a second chance. This is an historic opportunity, and we must not squander it.

The bipartisan bill we introduced this month is not perfect. I would like to go further. There are many mandatory minimums this bill does not impact. But the bill does not contain everything Senator Grassley would like either. That is the nature of compromise and it is the only way we can actually take a step toward passing historic legislation.

Today we will hear testimony about necessary reforms that have garnered broad agreement. Because of Senator Grassley’s leadership and building on the work of the last Congress, half of the members serving on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Republicans and Democrats, are sponsors of this bill. I expect those numbers to grow in the coming days. And I hope this coalition can work for more reforms in the future, but the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015 is a good start.

I view this bill through the eyes of a former prosecutor. I still treasure the shield that I carried as State’s Attorney in Chittenden County. It reminds me of the brave men and women on the front lines who protect us every day. These individuals deserve to have the resources they need to do their jobs effectively.

I also think about the families affected by our criminal justice system. That includes the families of inmates like our witness, Debi Campbell, whose children grew up in foster care because she received a 19 year sentence for selling methamphetamine. She will be the first to admit she should have served some time. But 19 years? She had no criminal history points – there was no violence involved. But she was sent away for almost two decades at enormous taxpayer expense. That simply does not make any sense. We have to do better.

Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates knows that the reform we have proposed is desperately needed. The Justice Department now must dedicate a quarter of its budget to the Bureau of Prisons every year. That means less money for victim’s services, law enforcement, and reentry programs. I thank Deputy Attorney General Yates for her leadership and for being here today.

Many people deserve recognition today for their commitment to improving our criminal justice system. Along with Chairman Grassley, Senators Durbin, Lee, Whitehouse, Graham, Schumer, Booker, and Scott all sought compromise, worked through disagreements, and demonstrated that Congress is still capable of coming together on challenging, yet critical issues. I also want to thank Senator Paul for working with me on the Justice Safety Valve Act, which would have gone much further, extending the safety valve to all mandatory minimum sentences. The sentencing reform bill we consider today contains important improvements, but injustices will remain and our work will not be done until we end mandatory sentencing.

While not in the room today, former Attorney General Eric Holder deserves special recognition. He long ago recognized inequities in our criminal justice system and the consequences of mass incarceration. Through his “Smart on Crime” initiative, he proved that addressing these inequities leads to a fairer and more effective system. Under Eric Holder’s leadership, last year, for the first time in 40 years, the overall crime rate and overall incarceration rate declined together.

I have learned over the past four decades that it often takes a few Congresses to make meaningful progress. We started this effort years ago and we have steadily increased support for it. If we continue to remember that we are here to serve the American people, historic reform is within our grasp. I thank all who have responded to the call to reform our criminal sentencing laws.

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