

Evangelicals Compel House to Pass Prison Reform

Some notable faith leaders have written to congressional leaders to show their support for a bipartisan prison reform act that's being considered by lawmakers in the House.

The Prison Reform and Redemption Act, co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Doug Collins, R-Georgia, and U.S. Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-New York, hope to cut down on federal recidivism rates. The House Judiciary Committee is expected to vote on the measure Wednesday.

Franklin Graham, Paula White, Jerry Falwell Jr. and Samuel Rodriguez are just a few of more than 200 evangelical leaders who have signed a letter calling on members of the House to quickly pass the measure.

"As leaders of communities of faith, we have a centuries-old mandate to care for prisoners and their families. It is our responsibility, and it is a joy. We have rejoiced with so many people whose lives have been profoundly changed when they have been afforded a second chance," the letter reads.

"Our work throughout the nation's prison system also affirms the need for our federal government to take practical actions, like those outlined in this bill, in order to reduce recidivism and to give our prisoners a better chance of rebuilding their lives, their families, and contributing to society," the letter continued.

"As representatives of millions of religious Americans, we have seen how so many in our own communities have been affected by inadequacies in our prison system, and we believe there is widespread support for these reforms," the leaders concluded.

So, what's in the proposal?

- Expansion of prison programs and earned time credit opportunities through the use of the Bureau of Prison's sponsored anti-recidivism programs, drug rehabilitation and work training.
- Risk assessment by the DOJ in which the department decides the best programming for each prisoner.
- Incentives for program completion, including increased phone privileges and the chance to serve remaining time in halfway housing.

The bill will use faith-based organizations to help in the efforts.

According to Christian ministry Prison Fellowship, about 40,000 federal prisoners will be released this year, and nearly 20,000 will return within the next three years.

"The revolving door of criminal justice is devastating to families and depresses economic activity in many communities," Heather Rice-Minus, vice president of government affairs for Prison Fellowship, told CBN News.

She supports the bill and is hopeful about its potential.

"The Prison Reform and Redemption Act will expand and improve the delivery of prison programming, allowing men and women in our federal prisons to return home better prepared to give back to their families and communities at their highest potential," said Rice-Minus.

Christian ministries, such as Prison Fellowship, have had success in changing re-entry statistics by working with prisoners in areas such as job training and spiritual mentoring.

The Texas Offenders Reentry Initiative, another Christian ministry, boasts a recidivism rate of 11 percent, while the

national average sits at 52 percent.

Under the House version of the bill, people convicted of 48 different categories, including homicide, child exploitation, sexual abuse, kidnapping and treason, are ineligible for credit toward pre-release.

Critics say that list is too broad.

According to *Politico*, the House version has the backing of both the White House and the Department of Justice. White House Advisor Jared Kushner is leading the effort to bridge the gap and keep the bill moving through the Senate.

However, the NAACP says the measure doesn't go far enough when it comes to addressing mandatory minimum sentences and it stops short of a bill introduced by Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, last year.

That bill would get rid of some mandatory minimum sentences for certain drug-related offenses.

However, *CNN* commentator and criminal justice reform advocate Van Jones writes, "There is still some room for progress. My big heartache—on this topic and so many others—is how much common ground there is when you get people talking—and yet how little we actually do about it. Taking a small but meaningful step together now could allow us to take more steps together later." {eo}

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