



Catholic Conference
of Illinois

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Dear Members of the Illinois Commission on Criminal Justice and Sentencing Reforms:

The Catholic faith has a long tradition of ministering to inmates, beginning with the urging in St. Matthew's Gospel to visit those in prison (25:36) and continuing today with Pope Francis' special outreach to prisoners. Early in his papacy Pope Francis stressed the importance of this ministry by washing the feet of juvenile prisoners during the Easter season. When he visited the United States in 2015, he stopped at a Philadelphia prison, counseling the inmates on the intention of their time behind bars.

"This time in your life can only have one purpose: to give you a hand in getting back on the right road, to give you a hand to help you rejoin society," Pope Francis said. "All of us are part of that effort, all of us are invited to encourage, help and enable your rehabilitation."

We were therefore heartened by Gov. Bruce Rauner's creation shortly after his inauguration of the Illinois Commission on Criminal Justice and Sentencing Reforms, with the goal of reducing the state's current prison population of more than 48,000 inmates by 25 percent by 2025. Members of the Catholic Conference of Illinois' Prison & Jail Ministry Committee attended and testified at several of the Commission's public hearings and are encouraged by the recommendations issued in your initial December 2015 report, as well as by legislative initiatives seeking to help inmates re-enter society.

These measures echo the mission of the Catholic Conference and our efforts of spreading the transformative power of our faith. We have partnered with Lewis University to create a prison ministry leadership program, whose graduates go on to train and coordinate volunteers to visit inmates across the state. We also applaud the work of Fr. David Kelly of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation in Chicago, who applies the principles of restorative justice by bringing offenders and victims together to repair the harm done by crime. This process reflects our faith by holding people accountable, making reparations, and rebuilding lives. We also are working to expand our ministry to the families, particularly the children, of those in prison, for they also suffer from the incarceration of their loved ones.

With both the executive and legislative branches examining criminal justice reform, we take this opportunity to urge adoption of the following initiatives:

Enact Compassionate Release

As the general public ages and encounters health challenges, so does the Illinois inmate population. As of 2014 more than 700 inmates were 65 or older and 275 were 70 or older, according to the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). In your report you recommend that terminally-ill and severely-incapacitated prisoners – except for those sentenced to natural life – be transferred to less secure facilities or home confinement when public safety will not be jeopardized. Our bishops echo this suggestion, noting our faith's emphasis on the inviolable dignity, value and worth of every human person.

Expand Rehabilitative Programs in State Prisons

Too many Illinois prisoners lack the educational and life skills to thrive in society. Less than half of Illinois inmates have a high school degree, and most read below a sixth-grade reading level, according to IDOC figures. Meanwhile, data also show that one-fourth of Illinois inmates are getting mental health services, while about half are in need of substance abuse treatment. It is recommended in your report that rehabilitative programs – such as a literacy curriculum, vocational classes, substance abuse treatment, jobs within the prison, life skills courses, and anger management classes – be expanded to a greater number of prisoners so they do not fall back into lives of crime when released from prison. Our U.S. and Illinois bishops concur, noting in a 2000 document on crime and criminal justice reform that “punishment must have a purpose. It must be coupled with treatment and, when possible, restitution.”

The Diocese of Belleville has taken the lead in prisoner literacy efforts, with a private citizen, Michael Schuette, financing a program that trains already literate inmates on how to teach other prisoners to read. The program now operates in two Illinois prisons, and the recidivism rate among participants has plummeted. Michael Schuette is working to expand this successful program to all Illinois prisons.

Ease Re-entry with Legislation Streamlining State IDs, Occupational Licenses, and Expungement

Once inmates are released, our responsibility for getting them “back on the right road” continues. A key to easier re-entry is a state identification card, as the individual sheds his prison identity for a new one. **House Bill 5915/Senate Bill 3368** both streamline the process for released prisoners to get state identification cards, which help them to rent apartments and apply for jobs.

We applaud the administration’s decision this spring to allow offenders to complete coursework for barber or cosmetologist licenses while still imprisoned, and even to apply for and meet with the licensing board via video conference up to six months before their release date. **House Bill 6973** builds on this re-entry initiative by easing the hurdles for ex-offenders to get certain occupational licenses, giving them a chance at such careers as a funeral director or embalmer, a roofer, a barber, a cosmetologist, or a nail technician. Public safety is ensured by prohibiting any ex-offenders convicted of homicide, sex offenses, armed robbery and other serious crimes.

We also support **House Bill 6328, which allows individuals to expunge from public record any arrests or charges that were later dismissed, acquitted, vacated or reversed.** For a 1-year period in Cook County, the individual also will not be charged the usual fee for expungement.

Increase Access to Ministerial Visits

The Catholic Conference of Illinois coordinates the Illinois Catholic Prison and Jail Ministry Network, which is made up of clergy and laity from each diocese who minister to prisoners and inmates of state, federal and local institutions. These volunteers celebrate Mass, offer communion services, hear confessions, and lead Bible studies in an effort of pastoral care that is key to any rehabilitation. But this ministry is not exclusively sacramental or program-based. Pastoral care is also provided by volunteers by simply visiting the prisoners, listening and being present.

Our clergy and lay Catholics are committed to this ministry, but are often hindered by a lack of sufficient access to prisons and jails. Prison and public safety must always come first, but should not stifle the restorative power of evangelization. We remain committed to working with state and local officials in order to minister to and be present for those behind bars. As our U.S. bishops noted in the 2000 document mentioned earlier, “rehabilitation and restoration must include the spiritual dimension of healing and hope.”

The Catholic Conference of Illinois is dedicated to this important ministry of serving prisoners, as well as to reaching out to families of those incarcerated and to the people and communities affected by crime. The issues and recommendations addressed here are just a few of the ways we hope to work with all of you on the Illinois Commission on Criminal Justice and Sentencing Reforms, as well as with other state and federal officials, as we increase recognition of and support for rehabilitation and restoration in our criminal justice system.

**Sincerely,
The Catholic Conference of Illinois**