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Executive Director

February 14, 2018

Dear Senator:

On behalf of our three million members and the 50 million students they serve, we urge you to vote yes on the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (S. 1917), scheduled for markup Thursday. This bill addresses crucial criminal and social justice reforms that are long overdue, particularly in how juveniles are treated by the criminal justice system. Votes associated with this issue may be included in NEA Legislative Report Card for the 115th Congress.

We are happy to see that S. 1917 would essentially ban solitary confinement of juveniles in the federal system. Solitary confinement of juveniles is a harsh practice that has been shown to have counterproductive effects. Solitary confinement is often used for a prolonged period and as a form of punishment in place of offering adequate support and mental health resources. Simply, solitary confinement runs counter to the mission of the criminal justice system to rehabilitate offenders.

The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act also makes important strides in addressing the mass incarceration epidemic brought on by mandatory minimum sentencing. According to the Congressional Research Service, the federal prison population has increased by almost 790 percent in the last two decades. Mandatory minimums are a major contributing factor to this dramatic increase because the amount of time people serve has risen due to federal sentencing guidelines. Mandatory minimum sentencing has also been shown to have a disproportionate impact on African Americans and Latinos. Further, these guidelines prevent judges from taking into account an individual's background and the circumstances of the offense.

Mandatory minimum sentencing reform is crucial to slowing the overwhelming growth of our prison population and addressing its disproportionate impact on communities of color. While the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act does not reduce or eliminate mandatory minimums, the bill will make several positive reforms with regards to mandatory minimum sentences. It will reduce enhanced penalties that apply to people with prior drug convictions, and eliminate the "three-strikes" mandatory life provisions. It will also create a second safety valve that gives judges discretion to sentence certain people with low-level offenses below the 10-year mandatory minimum. In all, these measures will ensure that strict mandatory minimums are not imposed on individuals who have little or no criminal history. Hopefully, these positive changes are the first of many to end mass incarceration and mandatory minimums which have had a devastating impact on families and children for too long.

We believe these are important steps forward in addressing the institutional problems in the criminal justice system. We thank the Judiciary Committee leadership for bringing this issue forward for a vote. Again, we urge you to vote yes on the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marc Egan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations