

Durbin welcomes Alton Mills to speak at Senate Forum on Criminal Justice Reform

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Illinoisan Alton Mills' mandatory life sentence was commuted by President Obama in December

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) met today with **Alton Mills**, an Illinoisan who was serving a mandatory life sentence for a nonviolent drug offense until his sentence was commuted by President Obama in December at Durbin’s urging. Mr. Mills and two of his federal public defenders, MiAngel Cody and Amanda Graham, are in Washington, D.C. at Senator Durbin’s invitation to address a meeting of the Senate Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee.

“An overlooked casualty in our ‘war on drugs’ are the men and women who have been convicted under disproportionately harsh mandatory minimum sentencing laws. One such man is Alton Mills, who served more than two decades of a mandatory life sentence for a nonviolent drug offense, a punishment even the sentencing judge disagreed with,” Durbin said. “I commend Alton for the bravery he has shown in choosing to tell his story, and I am honored to welcome him to Washington this week.”

The Senate Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee exists to foster dialogue between Senators and community leaders from across the country. Nearly every week the Senate is in session, the Steering Committee hosts meetings with advocates, organizations, policy experts, and elected officials to hear their knowledge and expertise in key issue areas. Tomorrow’s meeting will focus on criminal justice reform, and will include testimonials from Mr. Mills and law-enforcement, faith, and civil-rights leaders, including representatives from the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime and Incarceration, Justice Fellowship, and others.

Mr. Mills was convicted in 1994 for acting as a street-level courier in a crack cocaine conspiracy. At his sentencing, U.S. District Court Judge Marvin Aspen said “if I were free to sentence ... it would be something other than life.” Judge Aspen later wrote a letter supporting commutation of Mr. Mills’ sentence. After learning of Mr. Mills’ story and meeting with his family and attorney, Senator Durbin wrote President Obama in support of Mr. Mills’ petition for commutation of his sentence.

Mr. Mills also joined Senator Durbin last week at the City Club of Chicago’s public policy luncheon where Senator Durbin delivered remarks addressing the paradox of the American justice system: one system for people of means and with connections, and another, often harsher system for people on the margins of society, especially poor people of color.

Senator Durbin has long championed efforts to address inequities in the criminal justice system and mandatory minimum sentencing. In 2010, President Obama signed into law Senator Durbin’s Fair Sentencing Act. The bipartisan bill to curtail the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine marked the first time Congress has repealed a mandatory minimum since the Nixon administration. Durbin has since sponsored both

the Smarter Sentencing Act and the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act. The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, which was approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee earlier this year, grants judges greater sentencing flexibility for certain low-level drug offenders and establishes recidivism reduction programs, while targeting violent criminals.