



Durbin on First Step Act: Best chance to make meaningful changes in our federal drug sentencing laws

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WASHINGTON – In a speech on the Senate floor, U.S. Senate Democratic Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, today encouraged his Senate colleagues to support the revised [First Step Act](#), bipartisan criminal justice reform legislation. Durbin, along with Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley (R-IA), and Senators Mike Lee (R-UT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) introduced the *First Step Act* last month, which combines prison reform proposals that overwhelmingly passed in the House of Representatives earlier this year with sentencing reform provisions from the broadly bipartisan [Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act](#), which was authored by Durbin and Grassley and passed the Senate Judiciary Committee in February by a vote of 16-5. The *First Step Act* is endorsed by President Trump and [cosponsored](#) by more than a third of the Senate, evenly balanced among Democrats and Republicans. Following Durbin's remarks, the Senate voted to advance the *First Step Act* by a vote of 82-12.

“The revised *First Step Act* is a bipartisan sentencing and prison reform bill that is sponsored by 34 Senators – 17 Republicans, 17 Democrats. It is supported by President Trump and a broad spectrum of stakeholders,” Durbin said. “Congress should make this bipartisan legislation a fitting ending to this year. For all of the cynicism and skepticism about what Congress can achieve, we can prove as soon as tomorrow with one of the most historic changes in criminal justice legislation in our history that we can work together for the good of this nation. Our people who sent us to this job expect no less.”

In his speech on the Senate floor, Durbin also shared the story of Alton Mills. In 1994, at the age of 24, Alton was given a mandatory sentence of life without parole for a low-level nonviolent drug offense. Durbin sent then-President Obama a letter asking him to commute Alton's sentence. In December of 2015, Alton was released after 22 years behind bars. He now works as a mechanic at Chicago Transit Authority, got married,

and is a community college student, where he is pursuing an associate's degree. In February 2016, Durbin [hosted](#) Alton in Washington, D.C. to speak at a Senate forum on criminal justice reform.

The *First Step Act* is backed by a number of law enforcement groups, including the [nation's largest police group](#). It's also [supported by 172 former federal prosecutors](#) along with [sheriffs from 34 states](#) across the country. The National Governor's Association, which represents the governors of all 50 states, [praised the bill](#). A broad coalition of conservative and progressive groups along with a host of business leaders and faith-based organizations also support the *First Step Act*.

In February, the Senate Judiciary Committee voted to advance comprehensive legislation led by Durbin and Grassley that focuses mandatory minimum prison sentences on the most serious drug offenders and violent criminals, while giving judges more discretion to determine an appropriate sentence for individuals with minimal non-violent criminal histories. The [Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act](#) is cosponsored by 32 senators, divided equally between Republicans and Democrats, and has earned the support of numerous stakeholders from across the political spectrum, including civil rights, faith, and law enforcement groups.

In 2010, Durbin worked with then-Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) to pass the [Fair Sentencing Act](#), which eliminated the five-year mandatory minimum sentence for simple possession of crack and dramatically reduced the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine.

Since 1980, the federal prison population has grown by over 700 percent, and federal prison spending has climbed nearly 600 percent. Today, the United States holds more prisoners, by far, than any other country in the world. Overcrowded federal prisons consume one quarter of the Justice Department's discretionary budget, which undermines other important priorities, such as preventing crime and treating drug addiction.