



Durbin: Cotton amendments to the First Step Act only seek to shatter bipartisan compromise

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senate Democratic Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and lead Democratic sponsor of the *First Step Act*, today urged his colleagues to vote against the amendment to the *First Step Act* being offered by Senators Tom Cotton (R-AR) and John Kennedy (R-LA). In a speech on the Senate floor, Durbin argued that this amendment is a poison pill designed to gut the prison reforms in the *First Step Act* and shatter this bipartisan compromise.

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 the House of Representatives earlier this year with sentencing reforms 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. Yesterday, the Senate voted to advance the *First Step Act* by a vote of 82-12. A final passage vote is expected today or tomorrow.

“When it comes to the Cotton Amendments, members of the Senate really have a very clear and stark choice. They can support a bill which has been worked on in a bipartisan basis and enjoys the support of police, prosecutors, and those groups which protect our constitutional rights – all together, right and left supporting. They can support a bill that has bipartisan support here on the floor, colleagues and members who rarely come together, but we have come together on this bill because we have found a good compromise. They can support a bill which has the support of survivors and criminal

victims' organizations. Or they can vote for the Cotton Amendments, which are opposed by the leading crime victims' rights groups," Durbin said. "I hope my colleagues will join me in opposing the Cotton amendments."

The Cotton-Kennedy amendment is opposed by dozens of organization from across the political spectrum, including Heritage Action; Freedom Works; Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, a national network of more than 30,000 crime victims; Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime and Incarceration; and the Council of Prison Locals, which represents all federal prison guards.

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 Governors 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.