

Durbin Questions Witnesses During Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing On The Fifth Anniversary Of The Landmark First Step Act

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, today questioned witnesses during a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing entitled “Five Years of the *First Step Act*: Reimagining Rehabilitation and Protecting Public Safety.” The law serves as a beacon for “smart on crime” policies, and the hearing examined its successes and impact. Durbin first questioned Matthew Charles, a *First Step Act* beneficiary after serving over two decades in prison and now a Senior Policy Advisor at FAMM (formerly Families Against Mandatory Minimums),

about his personal experience and how Congress can continue to improve and build upon the *First Step Act*.

“There was a moment when your life turned around. Was that all your decision and your experience? Was it something external that made a difference to you that you think could help someone else in the future?” Durbin asked.

Mr. Charles responded that he felt like he needed to change when he was in the county jail. However, he wasn’t released until 22 years later.

During his questioning, Durbin also encouraged his colleagues to visit a prison to understand how it operates and meet with the individuals there to hear their stories.

“I have regularly throughout my congressional career. It is important that Members of Congress see this firsthand and meet the people in these prisons—those who are serving time and those who are watching to give you a better understanding of our system. And you will realize as Mr. Markle indicated that there is some danger associated with it. There are people there who will be dangerous and will always be dangerous and we have to acknowledge that reality. There are also people like you, Mr. Charles,” Durbin said.

Durbin then asked J. Charles Smith, State’s Attorney for Frederick County, Maryland, and President of the National District Attorneys Association, about what else Congress can do to build upon the *First Step Act*.

“Mr. Smith, from the District Attorneys Association, what are your thoughts about what else we could or should be doing for the *First Step Act*?” Durbin asked.

Mr. Smith responded that “the *First Step Act* did a great job of differentiating between good people making bad decisions and bad people making bad decisions. The bad people who make bad decisions stay in jail... The good people who made a bad decision, were convicted for it, went to jail for it, are getting rehabilitated and released earlier as well, as they should.”

Mr. Smith continued to say that in the United States, “we’re doing a great job of implementing reforms like the *First Step Act*. I think what we’re not doing a great job at is why people are committing a crime in the first place.”

The *First Step Act* was championed by Durbin; U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA); U. S. Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ), Chair of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on

Criminal Justice and Counterterrorism; U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Ranking Member of the Senate Judiciary Committee; and U.S. Senators Mike Lee (R-UT), John Cornyn (R-TX), and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI).

Video of Durbin's questions in Committee is available [here](#).

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