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South Carolina Should Promote Criminal Justice Reforms

Members of the House of Representatives,

We write to you to highlight the ongoing work of the Sentencing Reform Oversight Committee and stress the importance of bringing its criminal justice reform promise to fruition before the current legislative session expires. Despite the incredible strides that South Carolina has taken since its landmark Omnibus Crime Reduction and Sentencing Reform Act of 2010 (S. 1154), there remains much that can and should be done. With fresh polling¹ showing a groundswell of conservative support in favor of additional common-sense reforms, the time is ripe for South Carolina to act.

Even with the significant progress ushered in by the 2010 reform, South Carolina's criminal justice system is in need of additional improvements. Many of South Carolina's prisons remain understaffed, which undermines facility security and endangers staff and inmates.² Additionally, these prisons still needlessly admit a large population of non-violent offenders who often find themselves incarcerated well past their parole eligibility date.³ Once released, too many barriers exist between ex-offenders and their successful reentry into society. These shortcomings not only burden individuals within the system, including victims, but communities at large and taxpayers in particular. A bill introduced in the South Carolina House—HB5155—offers much needed additional improvements based on conversations and analysis conducted by the Sentencing Reform Oversight Committee.

Recent polling has shown once again the popularity of the “smart on crime” approach embodied by the 2010 reform act and the ongoing mission of the Sentencing Reform Oversight Committee among South Carolina's conservatives. A majority of conservative voters believe that the state sends too many people to prison and ought to make more use of alternatives to incarceration for non-violent offenders. Fully 71% of conservative voters in South Carolina believe that the length of a nonviolent offender's prison sentence is less important than ensuring that they are less likely to commit a crime upon return to the community. Unsurprisingly, 70% of conservatives also support allowing inmates to receive slight reductions to their sentences for good behavior and for completing programs designed to reduce their risk of reoffending.

These numbers should not come as a shock. Conservatives have long and ardently supported the efficient use of limited criminal justice resources in order to maximize public safety and increase the

return on investment of precious taxpayer dollars. Indeed, it was these kinds of conservative priorities that rallied support for the 2010 reforms, which have since helped reduce recidivism, crime, and costs.

With strong institutional support and a sizeable majority of supportive voters, South Carolina is ready to take the next step on criminal justice reform. The state has already seen substantial benefits accrue from the first stage of criminal justice reform enacted in 2010. **We commend Representatives Delleney, Pitts, Smith, Rutherford, Weeks, McCoy, Murphy, Alexander for their leadership, and urge the legislature to act swiftly to further boost these returns through legislation this session.**

Sincerely,

The R Street Institute

1. Poll results are available at <http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2018/03/south-carolina-criminal-justice-poll-topline-fin.pdf>. The poll was supported by Pew and conducted by Benenson Strategy Group and GS Strategy Group Poll.
2. John Monk, "Execution-style massacre of 4 SC prison inmates was 'gross negligence' lawsuits say," *The State*, Jan. 18, 2018. <http://www.thestate.com/news/local/crime/article194995644.html>.
3. Jim DeMint, "How Jim DeMint wants SC lawmakers to redefine 'tough on crime'," *The State*, March 2, 2018. <http://www.thestate.com/opinion/op-ed/article202932974.html>.