

Prison Fellowship Agenda for the 117th Congress and the New Administration



Each year, Prison Fellowship reaches more than 255,000 prisoners through our in-prison and Angel Tree programs. Our staff and network of volunteers guide incarcerated men and women as they confront negative patterns of thinking and behavior and pursue moral formation and good citizenship. We believe that all people are created in God's image, and no life is beyond His reach. From its beginnings in 1976, our late founder Chuck Colson understood how Prison Fellowship must not only bring hope to those behind prison walls, but challenge policymakers and the public in their approach to crime and incarceration.

Informed by our direct ministry work, Prison Fellowship is a catalyst for justice that restores in our nation's capital. Our advocacy played a crucial role in the passage of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (2003), Second Chance Act (2007), Fair Sentencing Act (2010), the First Step Act (2018), and the Fair Chance Act (2019), in addition to Pell Grant restoration for incarcerated students and removal of barriers to accessing the Paycheck Protection Program for small business owners with criminal records (2020). Inspired by this progress but convicted by the persistent challenges facing our criminal justice system, Prison Fellowship continues to prioritize reforms that advance proportional punishment, constructive correctional culture, and second chances in the 117th Congress.

I. COVID-19 and Criminal Justice

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) poses an exceptional threat to men and women living and working behind bars, while creating further hurdles to opportunity for the one in three Americans with a criminal record.

Support second chances during COVID-19: Emergency funding through the Second Chance Act will support community reentry providers who provide mentoring, job training, and transitional housing to formerly incarcerated Americans. The Biden administration should limit Paycheck Protection Program exclusions that deny emergency aid for second chance entrepreneurs. (Paycheck Protection Program Second Chance Act).

Expedite responsible emergency sentencing relief: Targeted, individualized sentencing relief during COVID-19 protects medically vulnerable prisoners and allows correctional facilities to better practice social distancing. The Department of Justice and Congress should insist that the Bureau of Prisons expand use of existing home confinement and compassionate release. We also urge federal funding to support state and local law enforcement leaders as they work to limit viral outbreaks in and around prisons and jails by safely transitioning more individuals to community corrections and providing key services for successful reintegration. ([COVID-19 Safer Detention Act](#); Federal Emergency Relief for State and Local Justice Systems).

Maintain progress towards constructive federal prisons: Modified operations and social distancing are important to quell the progression of COVID-19 throughout federal correctional facilities. However, we urge careful oversight of the BOP to ensure communication with families,

widespread provision of remote visitation, and safe, creative access to programming and religious worship until normal operations resume.

II. Policing Reform

Policing reforms should produce a healthier culture among law enforcement, address injustice and misconduct, and equip law enforcement officers for the vital work they do within our communities. Although the core of police reform must take place in our communities and state capitols, federal funding, oversight, research, and promotion of best practices can be vital catalysts for change.

III. Proportional Punishment

Prison Fellowship seeks due process and proportional punishment for the crime committed. We believe reductions in—or alternatives to—prison sentences are often compatible with both justice and public safety.

Eliminate Crack / Powder Cocaine Disparities: Disparate federal approaches to penalizing powder and crack cocaine crimes have had devastating consequences for communities of color. Up until 2010, distributing five grams of crack cocaine warranted the same mandatory minimum punishment as distributing 500 grams of powder cocaine. While the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 reduced this 100:1 disparity to 18:1, this unjust and racially discriminatory policy should be eliminated in favor of a consistent approach.

Cement the First Step Act's legacy: The historic, bipartisan First Step Act aimed to make federal sentencing more just and proportional. Lawmakers should advance fairness and equity through retroactive application of the law's sentencing provisions.

Promote state and local reforms: Whether through new appropriations or consolidation of existing Department of Justice funding streams, Congress should support evidence-based, innovative approaches to crime, incarceration, and public safety among state and local governments.

IV. Constructive Prison Culture

Prison Fellowship believes humane treatment and evidence-based correctional programming can make prisons sites of restoration that promote the pursuit of transformation and good citizenship.

Improve and closely monitor the federal prison system: Prison Fellowship urges vigorous oversight of the BOP's progress in expanding meaningful and effective programs as charged by the First Step Act, including faith-based programs like the Prison Fellowship Academy, which is resourced entirely by private donations. Prison Fellowship also encourages the new federal risk and needs assessment (PATTERN) be continually refined considering new data and feedback from outside stakeholders. We advise consideration of a new oversight body to work for safe and constructive federal prison environments and request consistent, full funding for implementation of the First Step Act.

IV. Unlocking Second Chances

Prison Fellowship advocates for policies that honor the dignity and potential of the formerly incarcerated and remove barriers to employment, safety net programs, and civil liberties.

Promote a second chance culture: Since launching the first Second Chance® Month in April 2017, Prison Fellowship has spearheaded the nationwide effort to unlock brighter futures for people with a criminal record, including through annual resolutions and proclamations. We request the Senate’s passage of an annual Second Chance Month resolution and the White House’s promulgation of a Second Chance Month Proclamation.

Reduce barriers to success: Safe and affordable housing, education, and meaningful employment are pivotal for successful community reintegration. The Biden administration and Congress should work to safely improve housing access among people with a criminal record. We support bipartisan legislation to promote opportunity for formerly incarcerated Americans. ([RE-ENTER Act](#), [Driving for Opportunity Act](#), and [Ed ACCESS Act](#)).

V. Conclusion

Recent victories in criminal justice reform demonstrate an unprecedented bipartisan rethinking about crime and incarceration. In a landscape where disproportional sentencing, a lack of rehabilitative opportunities, barriers to reentry, and racial inequities still pervade our justice system, Prison Fellowship offers a unique voice—grounded in a timeless Christian worldview, four decades of direct ministry to the incarcerated and their families, and a proven record of changing minds and laws. We welcome the opportunity to work with federal policymakers to advance the goals in this agenda.