THE SENTENCING PROJECT
RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY FOR REFORM

February 21, 2013

State Senator Eric Coleman
Co-Chair, Joint Committee on the Judiciary
Legislative Office Building
Room 2500
Hartford, CT 06106-1591

State Representative Gerald Fox
Co-Chair, Joint Committee on the Judiciary
Legislative Office Building
Room 2502
Hartford, CT 06106-1591

RE: The Sentencing Project Endorses Proposed Bill 6295

Dear Co-Chair Coleman and Co-Chair Fox:

The Sentencing Project, a national criminal justice research and advocacy organization, applauds the introduction of Proposed Bill 6295, legislation to limit the areas in high population districts that enhance drug offense penalties. The Sentencing Project supports efforts to address the penalty enhancements in drug-free zones that have contributed to growth in the Connecticut prison population.

The Connecticut prison population numbers more than 13,000; approximately 14.6% of sentenced prisoners are in prison for sale or possession of narcotics. The state's rate of incarceration is 27% higher than the average rate of incarceration of states in the northeast. Connecticut taxpayers spent over $929 million on corrections at an average cost of over $50,000 per prisoner in 2012 according to a recent analysis by the Vera Institute for Justice. While lawmakers are working to address the state's budget, addressing sentencing policy could result in reduced correctional expenditures.

Under current law, persons convicted of possessing drugs within 1,500 feet of an elementary, secondary school or licensed child day care center receive a two-year mandatory minimum sentence. While we should all be concerned about drug-selling activity to children, these laws are overly broad and in many cases apply to offenses where no children are involved. Proposed Bill 6295 would modify the size of these zones from 1,500 to 200 feet in jurisdictions with a population of 60,000 persons or more, impacting 14.54% of all drug offenses. *

2 year manda

In Connecticut's urban areas, the zones encompass a majority of many neighborhoods. In Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven, the restricted zones cover almost the entire city. Moreover, most drug offenses that take place in these designated areas do not target or involve children.

Reducing the size of school zones would impact racial disparities in Connecticut sentencing practices. According to Judicial Branch data, the proportion of African Americans convicted for drug offenses within school zones is greater than the proportion of those convicted for all drug

offenses. For example, African Americans represented 65% of persons convicted of drug offenses within the restricted zones, compared to 39% of those convicted of all drug offenses. *

The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee (LPR&I) reviewed 300 cases involving persons arrested for mandatory minimum drug sale offenses, which Proposed Bill 6295 seeks to address, and concluded that mandatory minimum sentencing laws achieve few of the stated objectives and do not work. Moreover, there has been no noticeable decline in drug use or drug trafficking since the introduction of mandatory drug laws in the Connecticut.

PRI study

The Sentencing Project encourages members of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary to vote in favor of Proposed Bill 6295, which carefully addresses current sentencing policy and offers a policy that contributes to public safety.

Sincerely,

Marc Mauer

Marc Mauer
Executive Director

cc: Joint Committee on the Judiciary