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House of Representatives
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
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MEMORANDUM

Date: January 25, 2011

To: All House Members

From: Representative Kenyatta Johnson 

Re: Co-sponsorship: Providing for a Pennsylvania Criminal Justice Commission

In the near future, I will be reintroducing legislation from last session (House Bill 1414) that would establish a Pennsylvania Criminal Justice Commission. At the federal level, a similar initiative has garnered bipartisan support from U.S. Senate Leadership, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, and the Obama Administration.

Pennsylvania's criminal justice system needs repair. Prisons are overcrowded, sentencing policies are uneven and often unfair, ex-convicts are poorly integrated into society, and the growing problem of gang violence has not received the attention it deserves. Its irregularities and inequities cut against the notion that we are a society founded on fundamental fairness. Our failure to address this problem has caused the nation's prisons to burst their seams with massive overcrowding as our neighborhoods become more dangerous. We are wasting billions of dollars and diminishing millions of lives.

The legislation that we will be reintroducing would create a subcommission under the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency to look at every aspect of our state's criminal justice system with an eye toward reshaping the process from top to bottom. We believe that it is time to bring together the best minds in Pennsylvania to confer, report, and make concrete recommendations about how we can reform the process.

Under this legislation, the Commission would review all areas of our criminal justice practices and issue specific findings, including an examination of:

- Reasons for the increase in Pennsylvania's crime and incarceration rate
- Prison administration policies, including the availability of pre-employment training programs and career progression for guards and prison administrators
- Costs of current incarceration policies
- The impact of gang activities
- Drug policies and their impact on incarceration, crime, and sentencing
- Policies as they relate to the mentally ill in the prison system
- Policies regarding the reintegrating of ex-offenders back into the community
- Any other area that the Commission deems relevant

In addition, the Commission would make recommendations for policy changes designed to:

- Refocus incarceration policies to reduce the overall incarceration rate while preserving public safety, cost-effectiveness, and societal fairness
- Decrease prison violence
- Improve prison administration, including competence and career enhancement of administrators
- Establish meaningful re-entry program for ex-offenders
- Reform our state's drug policies
- Improve treatment of the mentally ill in the prison system
- Reform any other aspect of the system that the Commission determines is necessary

If you would like to co-sponsor this legislation, please contact Deborah Brady at drbrady@pahouse.net.