



MINNESOTA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

May 10, 2016

Dear Legislator:

The Minnesota Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Minnesota, writes to express support for HF 3983 (Cornish)/SF 3481 (Latz), which would modify drug sentencing laws. The proposed sentencing changes will hold the most serious violent drug dealers accountable while helping to ensure that low-level, non-violent addicts get the drug and mental health treatment they need.

We have previously offered support for the Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines Commission's (MSGC) changes to the drug sentencing guidelines, which will go into effect should the Legislature not act. By seeking to separate those who are chemically dependent and in need of help from those who are bigger players in the narcotics trade, the MSGC modifications were an important first step in both relieving a crowded prison system and addressing the challenges of a prison population affected by substance abuse, mental illness, family fragmentation, neglect, a lack of education, and, perhaps most distressing, a lack of hope.

We believe that the Cornish/Latz legislation—the product of a tremendous amount of work among prosecutors, law enforcement, justice groups, and criminal defense lawyers—maintains the spirit of the MSGC's recommendations, improves upon them, and fosters the twin goals of promoting public safety and maintaining a criminal justice system that seeks not merely to punish, but also to heal and restore.

Dangerous criminals and those who inject disorder and cause harm to society, such as drug traffickers, should be punished appropriately—including with lengthy terms of incarceration. Over the long term, we as a society must move resources away from building more prisons for housing non-violent offenders. Minnesota should create better and more effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, and community supervision and reintegration programs.

Pope Francis has said that the name of God is mercy. The experience of God's mercy—an experience which is shared across the faith community—compels us to consider ways in which mercy can be the perfection of justice, preventing it from becoming the application of inflexible commands. The realm of public policy is not exempt from these discussions, and we are encouraged by the way in which groups often opposed to one another were able to come together civilly to explore how we can make our criminal justice system more just—precisely by distinguishing between those who are grave threats to the community and those who are in need of mercy and the care of our communities. In this way, this legislation can be a model of civil public discourse and the pursuit of the common good. We commend all parties involved and are grateful for their service.

Therefore, in light of the legislation's potential for fostering public safety and the rehabilitation of those suffering from substance abuse, as well as the way in which it transcends ideological and partisan boundaries in service of the common good, we urge its passage. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully yours,

Jason A. Adkins, Esq.
Executive Director
jadkins@mncc.org