



Testimony of Ms. Kathryn Mollen, Policy and Outreach Coordinator
Senate Judiciary Committee
April 8, 2016

Drug Sentencing Reform: S.F. 3481 (Latz)

Chairman Latz and Members of the Committee:

Good morning. My name is Kathryn Mollen and I am the policy and outreach coordinator for the Minnesota Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Minnesota. We offer our testimony today in support of S.F. 3481 (Latz), which would modify drug sentencing laws. We think that the changes do a better job than our current laws of addressing both the dynamics of drug trafficking today and the reality of substance abuse and associated criminality, which can derail the lives of many on the margins of society.

In March, we testified at an informational hearing of this committee in support of the Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines Commission's changes to the drug sentencing guidelines. 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, lack of education, and, perhaps most distressing, a lack of hope.

We believe that Senator Latz's legislation—the product of a tremendous amount of work among prosecutors, advocacy groups, and criminal defense lawyers—maintains the spirit of the MSGC's recommendations 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 to 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. As a society, however, we must, over the long-term, move resources away from building more prisons and instead toward better and more effective programs aimed at crime prevention, education, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, and community supervision and reintegration programs. To that end, this legislation responsibly notes the importance of directing savings generated by the reforms to reinvestment programs that address the problem of substance addiction in our communities.

Pope Francis has said that the name of God is mercy. The experience of God's mercy, an experience which is shared across faith communities, compels us to consider ways in which mercy can be the perfection of justice and prevent 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 different groups were able to come together civilly and explore together 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 this 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.