



Senate Bill 642 now offers a real first step toward reform

On Tuesday the Florida Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Criminal and Civil Justice approved Senate Bill 642, the Florida First Step Act. The subcommittee significantly amended the bill to raise the felony theft threshold from \$300 to \$750, to reform the so-called “truth in sentencing” rule requiring incarcerated people serve 85 percent of their sentence by allowing incarcerated people to earn more gain time to reduce their sentences to 65 percent of the original sentence for those convicted of nonviolent offenses, and to require racial impact statements for future criminal justice related legislation to ensure criminal justice policies do not disproportionately impact people of color as they often do now.

The Florida Campaign for Criminal Justice Reform had opposed the Florida First Step Act until Tuesday. With these changes, the coalition now supports the bill.

The following is a statement by **Scott McCoy, senior policy counsel for the SPLC Action Fund, a member of the Florida Campaign for Criminal Justice Reform:**

“While this legislation is not perfect, it is a solid step toward reforming a system that locks up too many people. Giving incarcerated people a chance to earn “gain time” towards release makes sense. Requiring them to serve 85 percent of their sentence regardless of their good conduct and rehabilitation during their incarceration sends the wrong message to people in prison. We should be incentivizing people to turn themselves around, not warehousing people at great expense to the taxpayer. After all, the vast majority of people in prison will eventually return home to their communities. We want them to come home as better people, not worse. We are encouraged by the change to 65 percent, but hope it soon becomes that way for all who are incarcerated.

And racial impact statements are essential if we hope to address the serious racial disparities that are manifest throughout our criminal justice system. We lock up too many people of color now, and these analyses will help policymakers attend to these racial disparities and work to eliminate them.

The bill also now takes the significant step of making certain sentencing reforms from past years, such as removing aggravated assault from the 10-20-Life mandatory minimum sentence, and the proposed reform of the 85 percent rule through increased gain time, retroactive. This change will result in an immediate and much-needed reduction in the prison population.”

The following is a statement by **Jessica Younts, vice president of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, a member of the Florida Campaign for Criminal Justice Reform:**

“It is our hope that this is really only the first step and we continue to see substantial reforms. Limiting eligibility for gain time only to non-violent offenses does not make sense from a public safety, fiscal, or faith perspective, if we want to encourage rehabilitation, and the definition of violent offenses is far too broad.

This bill now also recognizes that if we want people who are returning home to their communities and families from prison to succeed, we need to remove the barriers to employment and occupational licensing so that returning citizens can provide for themselves and their families. More needs to be done, but this is a step in the right direction.

There are almost 100,000 people incarcerated in Florida now at a cost of \$2.4 billion a year. This bill gives us a chance to have fewer people incarcerated in the future. And it is our hope that the full House and Senate will continue to strengthen the bill and to vote in favor of the Florida First Step Act and then take up more reform efforts soon.”

The following is a statement by **Micah Kubic, executive director of the ACLU of Florida, a member of the Florida Campaign for Criminal Justice:**

“While there is still more work left to be done, we are pleased lawmakers listened to Floridians on the type of criminal justice reforms they’d like to see in our state by accepting amendments to the Florida First Step Act. It will now remove the current cap of 15 percent on gain time for currently incarcerated people and anyone who enters prison in the future, so that they may actually utilize the gain time that can currently be earned, effectively incentivizing good behavior and rehabilitation.

It will also require a racial impact assessment six months after the Florida First Step Act goes into effect and mandate a racial impact statement for future criminal justice bills. These are significant improvements to the bill, which will help make our state a safer, stronger, freer, and more vibrant place.”

For a full list of organizations involved in the Florida Campaign for Criminal Justice Reform, go to www.betterjusticefl.com