



LOUISIANANS FOR
PRISON ALTERNATIVES

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LPA: Louisiana Takes Modest First Step In Reforming Ineffective Habitual Offender Statute

The Louisiana Senate today voted 30-6 in favor of [House Bill 518](#), which reforms the state's unjust, expensive and out-of-step [habitual offender](#) statute by eliminating certain first-time, nonviolent offenses from later being eligible for sentencing enhancements. This marks final passage of the bill as it heads to Gov. John Bel Edwards for his signature.

This legislation was supported by [Louisianans for Prison Alternatives](#) (LPA), a diverse statewide coalition committed to reducing Louisiana's imprisonment rate by ensuring the state passes and implements comprehensive justice reform.

The following statement is by **Jamila Johnson, senior supervising attorney for the SPLC Action Fund**:

“Louisiana’s habitual offender law is abused, misused and ineffective. People suffering from addiction, mental illness, and poverty can find themselves in prison for decades for something as minor as stealing \$14. By excluding certain first-time, nonviolent offenses from applying to future habitual offender enhancements, House Bill 518 represents a modest step forward in preventing lengthy sentences when they are not warranted. Our work on this issue, however, is not done.

“Instead of addressing the root causes of repeat offenses, the habitual offender statute punishes these symptoms. And Louisiana taxpayers are footing the bill for these long, harmful, and ineffective prison sentences. We need to fully move on from this outdated and expensive practice and invest in a safer Louisiana.”

The following statement is by **Alanah Odoms Hebert, executive director of the ACLU of Louisiana:**

“Louisiana’s so-called habitual offender law is a major driver of mass incarceration that does nothing to make our communities safer. More work must be done to fix this unjust law, but House Bill 518 is a sensible, incremental reform that will prevent certain first-time offenses from being used to lengthen future sentences unfairly or bully defendants into pleading guilty to crimes they didn’t commit.”

The following statement is by **Norris Henderson, executive director of Voice of the Experienced (VOTE):**

“For the past few years we have been educating Louisiana about the cruel and unusual punishments that come out of ‘three strikes’ laws. For those who believe prisons are good, and more prisons are better, no sentence will ever be long enough. Story after story, we hear from our people serving decades for what many would wonder if prison was appropriate at all. HB 518 is an acknowledgment by the legislature that there is a problem in our sentencing policy, and the Governor’s signature would provide the latest small step toward getting a fair justice system.”

The following statement is by **Mercedes Montagnes, executive director of the Promise of Justice Initiative:**

“Ultimately, this about the promise that Louisiana makes to each citizen – that we believe in fairness more than force, rehabilitation and redemption more than retribution. There is so much work to be done restoring our faith in a justice system. This was a good first step.”

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