



## **Civil Rights Groups and Advocates Rally at the Florida Capitol for Criminal Justice Reform**

*Over 250 participants, from activists to directly impacted Floridians, lobby legislators for common sense reforms*

**TALLAHASSEE, Fla.** — More than 250 constituents from across state gathered today to [rally at the Capitol](#) in support of changes that would improve the state's broken justice system. The rally was part of the [Florida Campaign for Criminal Justice Reform](#)'s Lobby Day.

For decades, Florida has relied primarily on mass incarceration as the solution to criminal justice issues. Instead, it has created a punitive and disparate system that drives people into jails and prisons and costs taxpayers millions without meaningfully increasing public safety. The system disproportionately affects people of color, especially black people, who make up 16.9 percent of the state's general population, but nearly half of the prison population.

"Our system locks up far too many people for far too long," said Shalini Goel Agarwal, senior supervising attorney for the SPLC Action Fund. "We can't ignore racial disparities any more or enact policies that make them worse."

More than 30 states and the federal government have recognized that "tough-on-crime" policies are counterproductive, and have responded by adopting data-driven, evidence-based reforms. Florida, however, continues to operate a costly and ineffective criminal justice system.

"Crime peaks in the adolescent years and drops sharply as adults reach their 30s and 40s, and that makes excessive sentencing practices largely counterproductive and extremely costly," said Judy Thompson, president of Forgotten Majority and the Florida Justice Impact Project. "Fact: Most people age out of criminal behavior. Fact: Most incarcerated citizens do go home and should be treated like human beings that matter."

The Florida Campaign for Criminal Justice Reform is a non-partisan, diverse coalition of organizations working to reform Florida's broken criminal justice system, safely reduce the state's prison population and eliminate racial disparities in the system.

"To our legislators, we know that your predecessors set up this disastrous prison system built on punishment, but the time is now for you to fix our broken system," said Denise Rock, executive director of Florida Cares. "Do not just placate us with small, ineffective changes or pass us by for other bills. Make real changes this year."

Members today met with legislators advocate for common sense reforms and share personal stories of how they've been impacted by the criminal justice system. Audrey Jennings-Hudgins, founder of Operation Overtime, was among them. Her son was sentenced to life in prison when he was 21 years old for an armed robbery in which no one was hurt.

"Over two decades later, my son and our family are still living this nightmare," Jennings-Hudgins said. "My son is a good man with a good heart who deserves the chance to be the person his heavenly father designed him to be."

Sen. Darryl Rouson, D – St. Petersburg, joined constituents at the rally. He is sponsoring several justice reform bills this year, including SB 734 relating to driver's license suspensions.

"The days have long passed since we believed that just locking up members of our community and throwing away the key was an effective deterrent and way to cleanse our society of its ills," Rouson said. "Today we know that rehabilitation works. Today we know that diversion works, and that part of effective rehabilitation is reforming laws in the first place that have only served to increase the incarceration rate. That's why I have sponsored the driver license reform bill that removes driver license suspensions for non-driving related offenses."

Neil Volz, political director for the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, discussed the importance of reentry support, including removing barriers for returning citizens trying to join the workforce and earn occupational licenses needed for employment.

"We believe that returning citizens - people with past convictions - can contribute a lot," Volz said. "When you're done, you can't get a job. No one I know thinks that makes any sense. When a debt is paid, it's paid."