

July 11, 2019

The Honorable Brian Kemp
206 Washington Street
111 State Capitol
Atlanta, Georgia 30334

Dear Governor Kemp,

We, the undersigned, urge you to support the reauthorization of the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform. Georgia has become a leader on criminal justice reforms, paving the way for federal reforms through the First Step Act, which was signed into law in December 2018 by President Donald Trump.

As President Trump said at the signing ceremony for the First Step Act, the states have led the way on criminal justice reform, specifically citing Georgia as one of the examples. “[T]hey’ve had tremendous — tremendous results,” he said, “results that are incredible.”¹ One of the reasons for the “tremendous results” is because of the critical work done by the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform.

Created by the Georgia General Assembly in 2011 as the Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform for Georgians and reauthorized through July 2012² as the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform through June 2018,³ the Council consists of experts who made recommendations for criminal justice reform policies for the Georgia General Assembly to consider. At the time, Georgia faced a projected 8 percent increase in the state’s prison population by 2016 and related costs of \$264 million.

The Council made its initial recommendations in November 2011. Although not every recommendation was adopted, the General Assembly passed many of the initial recommendations in 2012,⁴ including accountability courts and front-end risk assessments. Another recommendation from the Council’s first report, a safety valve exception to mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenders, was enacted in 2013.⁵

¹ The White House, “Remarks by President Trump at Signing Ceremony for S. 756, the ‘FIRST STEP Act of 2018’ and H.R. 6964, the ‘Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2018,’” December 21, 2018 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-signing-ceremony-s-756-first-step-act-2018-h-r-6964-juvenile-justice-reform-act-2018/>

² HB 265, 2011-2012 Regular Session <http://www.legis.ga.gov/Legislation/en-US/display/20112012/HB/265>

³ HB 349, 2013-2014 Regular Session <http://www.legis.ga.gov/Legislation/en-US/display/20132014/HB/349>

⁴ HB 1176, 2011-2012 Regular Session <http://www.legis.ga.gov/Legislation/en-US/display/20132014/HB/349>

⁵ Passed as part of HB 349 in 2013.

The Council's work was considered in virtually every legislative session since the initial recommendations. Since then, the General Assembly has passed reentry reform, juvenile justice reform, and parole reforms. The benefit to public safety speaks for itself. Although overall commitments to Georgia's prison system have declined, violent offenders now represent 67 percent of the state's prison population, up from 58 percent in 2008.⁶ This means that Georgia is focusing its resources on incarcerating dangerous criminals, as it should. Georgia's violent crime and property crime rates are at their lowest levels since 1971 and 1972, respectively.⁷ Georgia has also averted the \$264 million in prison costs.⁸

Governor Kemp, we urge you to keep Georgia at the forefront of criminal justice reform by urging the General Assembly to reauthorize the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform during the 2020 legislative session.

The work of the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice is not complete. Much more is left to be accomplished, particularly as it relates to second chance initiatives like record-sealing and expungement and mental health. This panel of experts will be essential to providing the General Assembly with specific recommendations on the best paths forward to continue the momentum for criminal justice reform in Georgia.

Sincerely,

Adam Brandon
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General Counsel
American Conservative Union

Holly Harris
President and Executive Director
Justice Action Network

Grover Norquist
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⁶ Samantha Harvell, Chloe Warnberg, and Chelsea Thomson, "Justice Reinvestment Initiative - Georgia," Urban Institute, April 2019 <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/jri-factsheet-ga.pdf>

⁷ Based on data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Unified Crime Reporting (UCR).

⁸ Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform, "Report of the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform - 2017," February 2017

Timothy R. Head
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cc: The Honorable Geoff Duncan
The Honorable David Ralston
The Honorable Jesse Stone
The Honorable Brian Strickland
The Honorable Chuck Efration