



December 7, 2015

**Re: Restoring Education and Learning (REAL) Act of 2015 (H.R. 2521)**

Dear Representatives:

We, the undersigned 121 civil rights, human rights, faith based, and criminal justice reform organizations, write to express our strong support for the REAL Act of 2015, introduced by Rep. Donna Edwards (D-MD), which would reinstate Pell Grant eligibility for people in state and federal prisons. We urge you to join the legislation as a co-sponsor and to act swiftly to pass it in the House.

In 1994, due to the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, incarcerated Americans lost a vital opportunity that was integral to successful development and reentry. The Crime Bill removed Pell Grant eligibility for individuals incarcerated in federal and state correctional facilities, and in-prison college and university programs across the country were largely eliminated. In fact, prior to 1995, there were 350 college degree programs in prisons; a decade later, there were only 12.<sup>1</sup>

Limiting access to education for people in prison is entirely counterintuitive. A 2013 meta-analysis conducted by the RAND Corporation found that, on average, incarcerated individuals who participated in correctional education programs had a 43 percent lower odds of recidivating than individuals who did not.<sup>2</sup> When people can avoid cycling back into the criminal justice system, our communities are safer, and our governments can reduce spending on prisons.

Reinstating financial aid eligibility to incarcerated individuals stirs many people's emotions. Victims and survivors of crime must live with trauma and contend with loss. Criminal justice reform must take into account the experiences of crime victims and survivors. However, if we are going to create a fair and just criminal justice system, we need to recognize the dignity and humanity of both the victim and the person who commits a crime so that communities can be restored. In-prison higher education supported by Pell Grants can help create environments where incarcerated individuals can reflect on their actions, are held accountable, and are able to develop the skills necessary to re-enter and contribute productively to society.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Rosenberg, *Restoring Pell Grants to Prisoners: Great Policy, Bad Politics*, AM. INSTS. FOR RESEARCH: INFORMED BLOG (Nov. 5, 2012), <http://www.quickanded.com/2012/11/restoring-pell-grants-to-prisoners-great-policy-bad-politics.html>.

<sup>2</sup> LOIS M. DAVIS, ET. AL., RAND CORP., *EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION* xvi (2013), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND\\_RR266.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.pdf).



Reinstating eligibility for incarcerated students will not take away resources from anyone who meets the income eligibility requirements for a grant. In fact, in the 1993-94 academic year – the last year that Pell Grants were available to people in prison – approximately 27,000 incarcerated individuals received less than 1 percent of the total \$6 billion spent on the program.<sup>3</sup> However, passage of the REAL Act will help ensure that people who will eventually return home from prison will do so equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to reintegrate into society.

Senator Claiborne Pell, longtime Senator from Rhode Island and the chief architect of the Pell Grant program, said “any student with the talent, desire, and drive, should be able to pursue higher education.” His vision and passion created opportunities for millions of students from poor and working class backgrounds. As a nation we should work to maintain the legacy of Senator Pell by advancing educational opportunities for people who seek to better their lives and their communities through education.

The Obama administration has taken action to expand post-secondary education opportunities for people in prison through the creation of the Second Chance Pilot Program. We commend this initiative but we also recognize the limits of administrative action. It is up to Congress to remedy the problem permanently and system-wide. **We urge you to support the REAL Act, which would reinstate Pell Grant eligibility for people in prison seeking to better their lives through higher education.**

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact Mel Gagarin ([mgagarin@collegeandcommunity.org](mailto:mgagarin@collegeandcommunity.org)), Sally Kaplan ([sally@peacealliance.org](mailto:sally@peacealliance.org)), or Kanya Bennett ([KBennett@aclu.org](mailto:KBennett@aclu.org)) with any questions.

Sincerely,

### National Organizations

9to5, National Association of Working Women  
All Of Us Or None  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO  
Association of University Centers on Disabilities  
Bread for the World  
Campaign to End the New Jim Crow  
Center for Community Change Action  
Center for Law and Social Policy  
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

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<sup>3</sup> WENDY ERISMAN & JEANNE BAYER CONTARDO, INST. FOR HIGHER EDUC. POLICY, LEARNING TO REDUCE RECIDIVISM (Nov. 2005), <http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/learningreducerecidivism.pdf>.



Coalition for Prisoners' Rights  
CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants)  
Drug Policy Alliance  
Education from the Inside Out Coalition  
Ella Baker Center for Human Rights  
Fair Shake Reentry Resource Center  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Global Justice Institute  
Human Rights Defense Center  
Incarcerated Nation Corp  
Justice For Families  
Justice Strategies  
The Lazarus Rite  
Legal Action Center  
Mennonite Central Committee, U.S. Washington Office  
Metropolitan Community Churches  
NAACP  
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.  
National Action Network NYC Chapter Second Chance Committee  
National African American Drug Policy Coalition, Inc.  
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Center for Transgender Equality  
National H.I.R.E. Network  
National LGBTQ Task Force  
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund  
The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens  
National Religious Campaign Against Torture  
National Workrights Institute  
The Peace Alliance  
The Petey Greene Program  
Prison Activist Resource Center  
Prison Policy Initiative  
Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College  
Real Cost of Prisons Project  
Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law  
The Sentencing Project  
Southern Poverty Law Center  
Student Peace Alliance  
Students for Sensible Drug Policy  
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries  
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society  
Voices for Progress



## State/Local Organizations

A New PATH (California)  
Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (North Carolina)  
Attica-Genesee Teaching Project (New York)  
Be the Evidence Project-Fordham University (New York)  
The Bronx Defenders (New York)  
Capital Area Against Mass Incarceration (New York)  
CASES (New York)  
Catalyst Collaborative for Innovative Social Change (Maryland)  
Center for Community Alternatives (New York)  
Center for Justice at Columbia University (New York)  
Citizens for Rehabilitation of Errants-Virginia, Inc (Virginia CURE) (Virginia)  
Community Service Society of New York (New York)  
Cornell Prison Education Program (New York)  
Correctional Association of NY (New York)  
The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport CO-OP Center (Connecticut)  
The Criminal Justice Initiative at Columbia University (New York)  
CURE ILLINOIS (Illinois)  
Family & Friends of Incarcerated People (Washington, DC)  
Florida Justice Institute (Florida)  
The Fortune Society (New York)  
Friends Committee on Legislation of California (California)  
Getting Out and Staying Out (New York)  
Hudson Link (New York)  
Institute For Criminal Justice Ethics (New York)  
Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (California)  
Liberal Arts in Prison Program at Grinnell College (Iowa)  
Marian House (Maryland)  
Massachusetts Coalition for Effective Public Safety, steering committee (Massachusetts)  
MN Second Chance Coalition (Minnesota)  
Mohawk Consortium College in Prison Program (New York)  
National Association for the Advancement of Returning Citizens (Washington, DC)  
National Lawyers Guild - New York City Chapter Mass Incarceration Committee (New York)  
NC-CURE (Citizens United for Restorative Effectiveness) (North Carolina)  
New York City Anti-Violence Project (New York)  
New York Reentry Education Network (New York)  
New York State Prisoner Justice Network (New York)  
NYC Books through Bars (New York)  
NYU Prison Education Program (New York)  
Ohio Justice & Policy Center (Ohio)  
Out For Justice (Maryland)



Partakers College Behind Bars (Massachusetts)  
Prison and Neighborhood Arts Project (Illinois)  
Prison Education Initiative (Michigan)  
Prisoner Reentry Institute, John Jay College (New York)  
Raleigh Mennonite Church (North Carolina)  
Recovery Zone (Illinois)  
Reforming Arts Incorporated (Georgia)  
Rhode Island State Council of Churches (Rhode Island)  
Root & Rebound (California)  
Rubicon Programs (California)  
St. Francis College (New York)  
Staley B Keith Social Justice Center (New York)  
STEPS to End Family Violence (New York)  
Stone Associates (Massachusetts)  
Stone Trust Reentry/Public Education (Massachusetts)  
Students for Prison Education and Reform (New Jersey)  
TASC Illinois (Illinois)  
Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (Texas)  
Think Outside the Cell Foundation (New York)  
Transcending Through Education Foundation (Rhode Island)  
Unicorn Projects (Missouri)  
University Beyond Bars (Washington)  
Urban League of Long Island (New York)  
V.O.T.E. (Louisiana)  
Wilson Boulevard Christian Church (Virginia)  
Women on The Rise Telling Herstory (New York)  
Women's Prison Association (New York)  
Youth Represent (New York)