Criminal Justice Reform Task Force
Annual Report, April 8, 2017

During the year since the 2016 Annual Conference, the Criminal Justice Reform Task Force has again continued its work to effect legislation that will not just end injustices, but promote positive changes in the policies and practices within the criminal justice system in our state. Our support encompasses legislation that would impact the systems that feed mass incarceration in New Jersey; relieve unnecessarily harsh and cruel conditions of imprisonment; and remove the debilitating "collateral consequences" that make reentry so difficult for those previously incarcerated. Our attention has also focused on the impact of legislation in addressing the greatly disproportionate victimization of people of color. This has been a central factor in the creation of mass incarceration and plays a key role in putting an end to it.

Action Alerts and other notifications went out through UULMNJ’s “Salsa” system as well as via the Task force’s 70+ email list, regarding legislation that was active during the year. Here is an overview of the bills we have supported over the past 1-2 years, and which passed during this current session (not all have been enacted):

1. **Restricting the use and abuse of solitary confinement**: Solitary Confinement Restriction Act passed in November 2016, vetoed by the Governor.
2. **Parole reform to release many prisoners unnecessarily held beyond their time of parole eligibility**: Parole reform bill passed in February 2017, still on Governor's desk.
3. **Prison telephone surcharge**: passed in June 2016, signed by Governor.
4. **Lifting the ban on certain drug offenders in receiving General Assistance**: passed in November 2016, signed by Governor.
5. **Require racial and ethnic impact statement for laws and regulations that will affect sentencing**: passed in both houses 2017, on Governor’s desk.

**Status of other important bills we are watching:**

1. **Require a Special Prosecutor in cases of police killings and charges of criminal abuse**: has passed the Senate, and voted out of Committee in Assembly, awaiting floor vote.
2. **Ending “prison gerrymandering” which distorts census numbers and unfairly impacts urban over rural areas where many prisons are located**: Has passed Senate, still in Assembly Committee.
3. **Bills to alter and/or improve police practices**: requiring body cameras, defining choke hold as a use of “deadly force,” and restricting its use. In Senate and assembly Committees.

And finally, there are some pieces of legislation in various stages after reintroduction for the current session, but with no real movement currently; as well as some that have not been reintroduced and perhaps would be with some advocacy from UULMNJ and other organizations:

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1. Issuing certificate of rehabilitation to certain offenders with drug abuse disorders.
2. Legalizing and regulating marijuana to end mass incarceration for drug use and help establish drug remediation programs;
3. Repealing unjust mandatory minimum sentencing.
4. Restoring voting rights to offenders and ex-offenders.
5. Prohibiting use of restraints on female prisoners during childbirth and immediately after delivery.

All of these are examples of how legislation can make real change for racial and social justice; as well have direct, life changing impact on the lives of tens of thousands of New Jersey men, women and children. Criminal Justice Reform Task Force members help make this happen by tracking and researching legislation; developing Action Alerts to disseminate to congregations; attending important legislative hearings and other meetings, and working in concert with other organizations, like the Integrated Justice Alliance, Prison Watch, and Salvation and Social Justice.

UULMNJ ACTION ALERTS: A singular challenge for this Task Force, and likely for all Task Forces, is to develop a far higher response rate to Action Alerts and other calls to congregational members to take action on legislation. Our Alerts are used to communicate with members of legislative committees, with our own district representatives, and with the Governor himself when a veto is possible or likely. Acting on an Alert is as simple as simple as clicking on a few links within the Alert itself, and the number of letters (and phone calls) a legislator receives can make a huge difference in how a bill progresses. This issue will be a focus of our break out session during the April Annual Meeting.

The CJR Task force and Reproductive Task Force chairs have decided to work together to push for passage of the bill prohibiting restraint of female prisoners during labor and immediately after delivery (S2371). This bill was allowed to die by “pocket veto” at end of 2015 sessions. A new bill has passed the Assembly, and Senate version has been languishing in Health and Human Services Committee. The Criminal Justice Task Force will work with Reproductive Justice Task force to contact the bill’s sponsor and the HHS Committee, and to engage congregations in letter writing to legislators, local newspaper Editors to highlight unnecessary cruelty and lack of humanity in shackling/chaining women during childbirth.

For more information and a full listing of legislative activity contact Task Force Chair Susan MacDonnell at susmacdonn@gmail.com.