

**2021 ANNUAL REPORT**

**CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM TASK FORCE**

As in past Issues Conference, for 2020-2021, the Criminal Justice Reform Task Force identified important bills to focus on for advocacy, education, and mobilizing of support among UU congregations. In any given two-year Legislative Session, there can be dozens of bills related to criminal justice reforms, and choosing only two to four each year to focus on is a difficult call. The Task Force has consistently found that 2-4 bills can be identified for a priority focus and yet not be successful in progressing through legislative committees. And on the other hand, bills we hadn’t identified can suddenly come to the fore, or be presented to us as priorities by other criminal justice advocates, asking for our support.

* **Legislation**

For 2020-21, the Task Force adopted an approach of identifying three priority CATEGORIES of bills. Within these categories, there were between 2 or 3 bills of special interest.

* **Juvenile Justice bills,** one to transform the Juvenile Justice system; a second to fund pilot projects for community-based Restorative Justice.
* **Reentry services bills,** one to significantly expand and ensure access toresidential community services; a second to expand the existing Fair Release and Reentry Act in terms of services and provision of those services in a timely manner; and a third to provide those who are released after serving their full mandatory sentences with the same reentry services that parolees have access to.
* **Dismantling racism,** which confirms the importance CJR places on the need to address racial disparities in every aspect of criminal justice in the state. One bill seeks to create a task force to study Reparations; and a second would narrowly proscribe the use of deadly force by law enforcement.

The third bill calls for a Concurrent Resolution to amend the state’s Constitution to specify that “slavery and involuntary servitude” is unconstitutional.

As expected, the bills this year have progressed at different speeds through the legislative process, influenced by many factors including how well advocates could push key legislators—especially the Senate Leader and House Speaker—to move bills to the fore. Throughout the nine months since the Issues Conference, the task force has focused efforts on mobilizing UUs from throughout the state to call and write to their own legislators, or to the key Committee leaders, in order to move bills to committee hearings and eventually floor votes.

Briefly, this is the current status of our bills as of June 1, 2021:

***Youth Justice bills*:**

**A710/S315 Youth Justice Transformation:** There have been no hearings to date.

**A4663/S2924 Restorative and Transformative Justice for Youth:**  There is a possibility of hearing in the Senate and Assembly Appropriations committees in June.

***Re-Entry bills:***

**A4685/S415 Reentry for those who Max-Out**: Assembly amended the bill, so now must be passed by Senate with amendment.

**A4785/S2953 Expanding Reentry Services:** Passed on Assembly vote with amendment, Senate must now consider amended bill.

**A4681/S2933 Expanding Community Residential Services:** Passed by Assembly, Senate has not scheduled a hearing yet.

***Dismantling Racism bills:***

**ACR145/SCR96 Amends the State Constitution to prohibit slavery or involuntary servitude:** This hasn’t been scheduled for hearings in the Senate or Assembly. Given requirements for public notice of a ballot question, the bill must pass the full Legislature by late summer August or it will have to wait for next election cycle.

**A711/S322 Establishes “New Jersey Reparations Task Force:** This has not been heard in either the Assembly or Senate Committees since it was introduced in January 2020.

**A4526/S3825 Establishes requirements for use of deadly force:** This bill is still in Assembly and Senate committees, and there have been no hearings to date.

***Resentencing bills****:* We have been watching a package of Resentencing bills which resulted from the recommendations of the Governor’s Sentencing Commission at the end of 2019. In the fall 2020, indications were that these bills would not face much opposition, so we felt comfortable with taking a watch and see position. However, several roadblocks delayed progress, and eventually led to a conditional veto by Governor Murphy. A partial solution to the veto directed the AG to implement changes that were not in dispute-- adjusting the sentencing guidelines to allow more judicial discretion for most non-violent convictions, and developing processes to allow for current inmates to request retroactive resentencing. The Criminal Justice Reform task force will continue to advocate for the implementation of all of the 2019 recommendations of the Sentencing Commission, and to advocate for the thoughtful and data-based consideration of including violent offenses in any sentencing and criminal justice reform.

***The continued crisis at Edna Mahan Correctional Center, the women’s prison in Clinton****:* Just as in 2020 the Covid-19 crisis in NJ prisons called on us to add the S2519, the Public Health Emergency Credit bill to an urgent Call to Action, in 2021 the culture of abuse in New Jersey Prisons reached a crisis point once again at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility (EMCF). We partnered with the UUFANJ Reproductive Justice Task Force and advocacy partners across the state as part of New Jersey Prison Justice Watch (NJPJW), the coalition that grew from the New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (NJ-CAIC), to coordinate and publicize listening sessions and rallies to bring attention to the culture of abuse at EMCF and across all of the New Jersey State Prisons. In response, the New Jersey Legislature introduced a slew of new bills to address the abusive conditions and the retribution often faced by people who are incarcerated and are witnesses to or victims of the abuse.

The need for continuing to follow passed legislation through the enactment phase was definitely highlighted by the recurrence of abuse at EMCF this year. Key aspects of the "Dignity for Incarcerated Primary Caretaker Parents Act," for example, which were due to have been implemented in August 2020 were not implemented. If there had been a robust commitment to implementation, including the required changes to the Office of the Ombudsman and creation of an advisory board, these changes could have greatly improved the DOC’s response to ongoing reports of physical and sexual abuse.

***Next Steps:*** While the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown has limited our ability to hold educational events in person and show up in Trenton to testify, it has in some ways galvanized our advocacy and allowed us to organize state-wide and with our coalition partners without restrictions based on physical location.

We became more engaged with our coalition partners while advocating to address the Covid-19 and the crisis of the “culture of abuse” in women’s and men’s prisons throughout the state. We’ve used new partnerships to coordinate our advocacy efforts to advance other important legislation, especially in the case of the Youth Justice and re-entry legislation. Similarly, we recognize there are many issues around policing that need to be addressed, and no single bill will address them all. A new bill supported by our advocacy partners is one that we think needs CJR support as well--**S2617 Establishes crime of law enforcement officer choking another person; designated as George Floyd's Law**.

We also recognize that some of our priorities are not shared by legislators or the public. There is a need for increased education about the need for some of the anti-racism legislation. We are working with our partners to schedule additional education events around ACR145/SCR96. Similarly, the issue of reparations is so important and requires so much education to introduce the concept to UUs and the general public that we are spinning off a new task force to address the issue.

As of the beginning of June, it is hard to know what may be addressed before the beginning of “campaign season” and before the lame duck session. The Youth Justice bill and the reentry bills seem to be making progress, and we should do everything we can to help them advance. More “controversial” bills such as the Concurrent Resolution to amend the state’s Constitution, and forming a Reparations Task Force may need to wait until the lame duck session for progress in the legislature. Educating the public—including all of our UU congregations-- about these bills should be the primary focus until they are heard.

All of this makes clear to us that it is essential to pay increased attention to how UUFA Task Forces can be better resourced, so that outreach and education at the level of our congregations statewide will continue to develop new participation in our statewide advocacy work.

***And lastly - It’s time for new leadership for the Criminal Justice Reform Task Force. So please, if you have a passion for this issue, be in touch with Susan or Anne or Charles Loflin.***

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**Monthly Conference Calls**: First Tuesday, 8PM. Contact a co-chair to be added to the distribution list so that you will receive notices, agendas, the correct zoom link.