

May 7, 2012

The Honorable Lamar Smith
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Conyers
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Conyers:

We are writing to urge you to oppose inclusion of any mandatory minimum sentencing provisions in the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). We are unaware of any evidence that such sentences will reduce violence against women and fear they actually could do more harm than good.

Please know that we believe that reducing the level of violence directed at women is an extremely worthwhile objective and an issue of national concern. We recognize and appreciate that many of the proposals that will be considered by your committee enjoy broad bipartisan support, as well as the overwhelming support of the American public.

We do not believe, however, that new mandatory minimum sentencing laws are an appropriate or cost-effective way to combat violence against women. In fact, there is reason to believe that enacting mandatory minimums could undermine this important goal. According to the National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women, long mandatory minimum sentences can keep victims who were assaulted by someone they know from reporting the crime.

The best way to punish violent offenders is to permit courts to consider the individual circumstances of each offense and offender, and to impose a proportionate sentence. We have no confidence that one-size-fits-all sentencing schemes will provide the degree of individualized justice the American public - and especially the victims of gender violence - deserve and expect.

Thank you for your leadership on this important issue, and please do not hesitate to contact any of us if you should have any questions.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union
Families Against Mandatory Minimums
Kentucky Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
Legal Momentum
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
National Council of Jewish Women
National Legal Aid & Defender Association
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
Ross Silverman LLP
The Sentencing Project
The Violence Intervention Program
YWCA USA