

House panel approves bill to overhaul sentencing laws

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a rare bipartisan effort, the House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday approved legislation that would make sweeping changes to U.S. sentencing laws, reducing prison time for some nonviolent drug offenders.

The bill, backed by voice vote, comes less than a month after the Senate's judiciary panel approved similar legislation. The aim of the bipartisan bills, the products of years of negotiations, is to reduce overcrowding in the nation's prisons, save taxpayer dollars and give some nonviolent offenders a second chance while keeping the most dangerous criminals in prison.

Like the Senate bill, the House legislation would allow judges discretion to give lesser sentences than federal mandatory minimums, reducing mandatory life sentences for three-time, nonviolent drug offenders to 25 years. It would also reduce mandatory sentences for two-time offenders.

The legislation would apply those sentencing reductions retroactively, except for offenders who have prior serious violent felony convictions that resulted in a prison sentence of greater than 13 months.

The House bill is not as broad as the Senate bill, which would also create programs to help prisoners re-enter society and lay out new guidelines for juvenile and elderly prisoners, among other measures. House Judiciary Committee Chairman Robert Goodlatte, R-Va., said his panel will deal with those issues in separate bills.

Goodlatte said the legislation would make "common-sense changes." The bill has the support of some of the most conservative and some of the most liberal members of the committee, including Republican Rep. Raul Labrador of Idaho and Democratic Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas.

Michigan Rep. John Conyers, the top Democrat on the panel, said "the bill reflects the recognition that criminal law is a blunt instrument — and it is difficult to achieve just results in every case."

After the markup, Goodlatte said it was possible the sentencing bill could move to the House floor before the end of the year. He said it still hasn't been decided, though, whether the committee will wait to pass all of its criminal justice bills before any floor action.

President Barack Obama has said he is supportive of the congressional effort to change the U.S. justice system. He said last month that the country is "in a unique moment" in which people are asking hard questions about the system and trying to make it more effective and fair.

Disparate voices — from Obama and the American Civil Liberties Union to the conservative Koch Industries — have agreed the current system is broken. Since 1980, the federal prison population has exploded, in part because of mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenders. In 1980, the federal prison population was less than 25,000. Today, it is more than 200,000.

The panel also approved several other bills that deal with criminal justice reform, including legislation that would attempt to ensure that people convicted of federal crimes were knowingly breaking the law.

Another bill approved by the panel would strike sections of the U.S. code that lawmakers said are arbitrary, should not be subject to criminal penalties or are rarely prosecuted. That includes statutes like those making it a federal crime to knowingly and for profit use the U.S. Forest Service mascot "Woodsy Owl," or the slogan "Give a Hoot, Don't Pollute."

Goodlatte called such federal crimes "outdated, ill-drafted, or, frankly, ridiculous."

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