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January 24, 2018

Dear Members of the Alabama State Legislature:

As you know, the recommendations of the Alabama Juvenile Justice Task Force (“AJJTF” or “Task Force”) were recently finalized and released to the public. As organizations with conservative credentials and expertise in the area of criminal justice, we are writing to provide you with our views of the approach taken by the AJJTF. In short, we see the Task Force’s recommendations as an important step toward Alabama improving its juvenile justice system in ways that will cut costs and bolster public safety.

Made up of state and local leaders, the Alabama Task Force conducted a six-month, data-driven study to form the basis of its recommendations. The AJJTF study found that separating out young people who have committed serious crimes, and finding more ways to keep those who do not present a safety risk with their families, had important benefits. By limiting removals to only those who have committed serious offenses or have significant criminal history, the state would see considerable savings, as the cost of juvenile incarceration is extremely high. By freeing up critical revenue and spending a portion of the savings on strengthening probation and evidence-based behavioral programming, Alabama could cut costs and reduce recidivism.

The AJJTF recommendations offer an additional benefit. As former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich once observed: “If you put non-violent and violent offenders in the same institution, which group will come out looking more like the other?” The answer is obvious. The AJJTF’s recommendations would result in the separating young people who present a threat to public safety (and held in state-funded facilities) from those who do not (and kept with their families but subject to supervision and other penalties). As such, Alabama would prevent its juvenile justice facilities from becoming incubators that serve to harden youth and ultimately further them from becoming successful members of society.

Assuming the Task Force’s recommendations are enacted, Alabama will be in good company. States like Georgia, Texas, Kansas, Utah and others have enacted legislation similar to the changes recommended by the AJJTF. And the results have been noteworthy.

- Georgia pursued reform in 2013 after decades of research told policy makers that keeping youths with less serious offences in costly state-funded facilities yielded poor public safety returns. As a result, Georgia has avoided millions in costs and reallocated juvenile justice spending towards more effective ways to hold young people accountable without separating them from their families. Most importantly, since the reforms were passed, juvenile arrests have dropped 30 percent.

- Texas policymakers enacted a series of laws between 2007-2011 aimed at reducing the state's youth incarceration rate, including a prohibition on placing of youths in state-run facilities for misdemeanor offenses. As a result, the number of young people held in facilities declined by 66 percent without a corresponding increase in crime. The state shut down eight state run juvenile correctional facilities, saving \$179 million.
- Prior to enacting its reforms, Kansas was spending \$89,000 per year on each detained minor. In 2016, the state enacted reforms similar to those recommended by Alabama's juvenile justice task force to address these costs. As a result, Kansas has already been able to close one juvenile detention center due to the reduction of youth incarceration. Looking forward, it is estimated that Kansas will be able to reduce the out-of-home youth population by 60 percent overall, saving taxpayers \$72 million by 2022.
- Utah officials estimated that juvenile detention (\$127,750) is 17 times more than the cost of community supervision (\$7,500). In March 2017, Utah enacted reforms expected to cut the number of juveniles held in custody by 47 percent. A portion of the \$70 million in savings will be reinvested in evidence-based alternative approaches to juvenile crime that cut recidivism rates and improve public safety.

As conservatives, we believe it is possible to be tough on crime and on government spending, while recognizing that each person has dignity and value. We commend Governor Ivey, Chief Justice Stuart, Speaker McCutcheon, and Senate President Pro Tempore Marsh for initiating and contributing to this effort to reduce government spending while protecting citizens from crime and strengthening families and communities. If enacted, the Task Force's recommendations would align Alabama's juvenile justice system with conservative principles that prioritize public safety, foster fiscal responsibility, and remove children from families only as a last resort.

As you consider the Task Force's juvenile justice recommendations for reform, please feel free to reach out to any of the signatory organizations listed below, if we can answer any questions, offer testimony, or provide technical assistance.

Respectfully,



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