

U.S. Sens. Grassley, Scott optimistic on sentencing reform

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(Photo: William Petroski/Des Moines Register)

U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley, joined by a fellow Republican lawmaker from South Carolina, is expressing optimism about the prospects for passing federal criminal sentencing reform legislation.

The senior Iowa senator spoke at a news conference Wednesday at the Des Moines International Airport with U.S. Sen. Tim Scott, who gave a powerful speech on the Senate floor last week in which he described being targeted by police because of he is black. Scott was stopped by law enforcement seven times in one year while he was an elected official, sometimes for speeding, but other times simply because he was driving a new car in the wrong neighborhood or other insignificant reasons, he said.

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Scott saluted Grassley's work Wednesday on justice reform issues, saying the proposed legislation has attracted a broad coalition from the far left to the far right.

"This is an unusual time when we seem to have the stars aligning," he added. He described the legislation as serving the best interests of communities as well as individuals.

The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act is authored by Grassley and co-authored by Scott. The package would reduce mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenders and would expand prison programs intended to reduce the likelihood that inmates will re-offend. It would also reduce sentences for inmates who successfully complete those programs. In addition, the bill would make changes to the federal justice system, such as allowing people convicted of certain crimes as juveniles to expunge their criminal records if they turn their lives around.

The bill has cleared the Senate Judiciary Committee, which is chaired by Grassley, and is awaiting action by the full Senate. Meanwhile, House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., has announced the House will consider several separate pieces of legislation to address criminal justice reform. Grassley said the House proposals include addressing such issues as asset forfeiture, but he expressed confidence any differences can be ironed out in a House-Senate conference committee.

Grassley said the legislation responds to Iowans who have expressed concerns about a rising federal prison population, costs of housing them and the possibility that some people with relatively minor criminal backgrounds are receiving lengthy sentences intended for hardcore criminals.

"Successfully addressing the different perspectives has not been an easy task, especially if we want to ensure that career criminals and the most violent offenders are not allowed to wreak havoc once again in their communities," Grassley said. "The work that we started more than a year ago has been a thoughtful, bipartisan deliberation that will promote opportunities to reduce recidivism while protecting our communities from violent career

criminals."

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The Rev. Lee Schott, a United Methodist Church clergy member who ministers to inmates at the Mitchellville state women's prison, expressed support for the legislation. She urged Grassley and Scott to continue their work. Former U.S. Attorney Matt Whitaker of Des Moines also endorsed the proposal. He said it strikes the right balance by protecting communities, freeing up space in federal prisons, and allowing law enforcement to focus on violent criminals.

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