June 22, 2021

United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

United States House of Representatives
Ford House Office Building, Room 217
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and members of the 117th Congress,

Slavery is an evil that has loomed over our nation since its founding. For centuries, slavery brutally terrorized and exploited Black people, and its racist legacy -- carried through Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, and police brutality -- continues to threaten the lives of Black people, and other people of color.

Passed in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is celebrated for abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude. However, to the surprise of many, it includes an exception clause that has been understood throughout history to allow slavery and involuntary servitude to be used as punishment for crime. During Reconstruction, this understanding encouraged the criminalization, incarceration, and re-enslavement of Black people.

Still today, more than 150 years later, people who are incarcerated and detained across our country are disproportionately Black and brown and forced to work for little to no pay under the threat of additional punitive measures, such as the loss of family visits and solitary confinement.

It is time we unequivocally make the evils of slavery and involuntary servitude history. We, the undersigned organizations, endorse Senate Joint Resolution 21 and House Joint Resolution 53 as an amendment to the U.S. Constitution introduced by Senator Jeff Merkley (OR) and Representative Nikema Williams (GA-05), respectively, which reads:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude may be imposed as a punishment for a crime.

We urge you to cosponsor and vote to pass this amendment with urgency to abolish slavery and involuntary servitude, once and for all.

Signed,

Abolish Slavery National Network
Abolish Private Prisons
Action Center on Race and the Economy
Alliance of Families for Justice
American Civil Liberties Union
American Friends Service Committee of Arizona
Amnesty International USA
Anti-Recidivism Coalition
Arts for Healing and Justice Network
Black and Pink
Brennan Center for Justice
The Bronx Defenders
California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice
California Lawyers for the Arts
Civil Rights Corps
College and Community Fellowship
Common Justice
Color of Change
Community Alliance on Prisons
Constitutional Accountability Center
CURE National
#DetentionKills
Detroit Justice Center
Dolores Street Community Services
Dream Corps Justice
Ensuring Parole for Incarcerated Citizens
Equal Justice Initiative
Families Against Mandatory Minimums
Fellowship of Reconciliation
Filling the Gap
Forward Justice
Freedom United
FWD.us
Guazabara Insights
Immigrant Defense Advocates
Impact Justice
Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee
Incarceration Nations Network
Just Leadership USA
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
Legal Services for Prisoners with Children
MarchOn
Michigan Liberation
Movement for Family Power
National Religious Campaign Against Torture
One Fair Wage
Polaris
Presente
Prison Policy Initiative
Prisoners' Legal Services of Massachusetts
Project South
Promise of Justice Initiative
Rehabilitation Through the Arts
Represent Justice
SawariMedia
Seventh Generation Interfaith Coalition for Responsible Investment
Students for Sensible Drug Policy
Southern Anti-Racism Network
Southern Poverty Law Center
Texas Organizing Project
The Community
Towards Justice
Transgender Law Center
United Voices of Cortland
Vera Institute of Justice
Verité
Vital Voices Global Partnership
WE GOT US NOW
Working Families Party
Worth Rises
Young Women’s Freedom Center
Zealous