

Activists and Personalities Urge U.S. President to Grant Clemencies and End Mass Incarceration



Washington, June 23 (RHC)-- Granting more clemencies would help fight mass incarceration, according to a letter signed by 41 criminal justice activists, lawyers, and law professors and sent to U.S. President Barack Obama Tuesday.

The letter, which includes signatories such as author Michelle Alexander, former administration official Van Jones, and the top leadership of Harvard Law School's criminal justice program, urges Obama to pick up the pace on granting clemency.

According to statistics by the U.S. Department of Justice, there were 11,861 clemency petitions pending as of June 6. According to the authors of the letter, at least 1,500 of these cases meet the criteria Obama has laid for clemency: long sentences and convictions based on non-violent drug charges.

“Many of these individuals have already served decades behind bars for nonviolent drug offenses,” the letter reads, as published by Fusion. “Their families have been torn apart and their chances for happy, successful lives curtailed. Nothing can undo the injustice of their original sentences, but failing to grant the commutations for which they are eligible will add a second injustice.”

The presidential clemency power is seen by many advocates as a key tool in fighting mass incarceration. In the letter, although the authors commend Obama’s leadership on criminal justice reforms, where he’s commuted the sentences of 348 inmates in the past seven years, they say more needs to be done.

“There is still time to accelerate the process so your clemency initiative fulfills the goals you set,” the letter-writers say. “But we believe that only your personal leadership will break the bureaucratic logjam that is plaguing the program. No person in prison who meets the criteria for relief should still be behind bars when you leave office. We hope you will move quickly to ensure everyone in your administration acts with the proper diligence to make that promise a reality.”

Obama’s pardon attorney resigned earlier this year, saying in a letter that her office had been riddled with bureaucracy and a lack of resources. Still Obama has been granting clemencies more frequently this year than he has in the past.

One of the most prominent authors of the letter, Alexander, wrote a book in 2010 titled *The New Jim Crow*, which is heralded as one of the strongest critiques of the U.S.’s mass incarceration system. Just on Tuesday, the book was cited by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s scathing critique of U.S. police.

White House spokesperson Brandi Hoffine told Fusion that Obama will continue to issue commutations throughout the rest of his presidency.

“Through his actions and his words, President Obama has demonstrated a commitment to the commutations process not seen by any other president in the modern era,” she said. “To date, he has issued more commutations than the past seven presidents combined.”

Unfortunately, that’s not true. According to Fusion, former U.S. President Gerald Ford granted clemency to more than 13,600 Vietnam War draft dodgers. But past presidents, at least before George W. Bush, weren’t dealing with federal prison populations that exceeded 200,000 people.

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