

# VICTIMS ADVISORY GROUP

*A Standing Advisory Group of the United States Sentencing Commission*



**T. Michael Andrews, Chair**

Elizabeth Cronin  
Kimberley Garth-James  
Margaret A. Garvin  
Francéy Hakes

Mary G. Leary  
Keli B. Luther  
James R. Marsh  
Virginia C. Swisher

July 28, 2017

United States Sentencing Commission  
One Columbus Circle, N.E.  
Suite 2-500, South Lobby  
Washington, D.C. 20002

RE: VAG's Response to the Proposed 2017-2018 Priorities

Dear Chairman Pryor and Members of the Commission:

The Victims Advisory Group (VAG) appreciates the opportunity to provide a written response to the Commission's notice of proposed 2017-2018 priorities. The VAG urges the Commission to continue the work begun during last year's amendment cycle on the following topics: tribal issues and alternatives to incarceration (first offenders). Consistent with the views expressed in the VAG's February 21, 2017 response to the 2017 Proposed Amendments to the Sentencing Guidelines, the VAG opposes any changes to the treatment of juvenile adjudications and revocations for criminal history purposes and opposes changes to the commentary of §3E1.1 (Acceptance of Responsibility). In light of this opposition, the VAG suggests that these topics do not need to be included in the Commission's final priorities for the 2017-2018 amendment cycle. The VAG has not identified any additional topics with an impact on victims that need to be addressed by the Commission in the 2017-2018 cycle.

The VAG appreciates the opportunity to address the victim related issues in relation to the impact of offenses. We hope that our collective views will assist the Commission in its deliberations on these important matters of public policy.

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Should you have any further questions or require any clarification regarding the suggestions, please feel free to contact us.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "T. Andrews", is written over a faint circular stamp that matches the seal of the United States Sentencing Commission.

Victims Advisory Group  
July 2017

Attachment: VAG's February 21<sup>st</sup> 2017, Letter to the Commission Regarding the Response to the 2017 Proposed Amendments to the Sentencing Guidelines.

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February 21, 2017

United States Sentencing Commission  
One Columbus Circle, N.E.  
Suite 2-500, South Lobby  
Washington, D.C. 20002

RE: VAG's Response to the 2017 Proposed Amendments to the Sentencing Guidelines.

Dear Chairman Saris and Members of the Commission:

The Victims Advisory Group (VAG) appreciates the opportunity to provide written response to the Commission on the proposed amendments regarding tribal issues, youthful offenders, criminal history, acceptance of responsibility, and miscellaneous (Use of a Computer Enhancement in §2G1.3). The VAG urges the Commission to consider the specific concerns addressed below especially with regard to the impact on victims.

## I. Tribal Issues

The VAG recommends the Commission adopt the recommendations that lists the relevant factors that courts may consider when considering a §4A1.2(i) upward or downward departure with regard to Criminal History Category VI. The VAG supports that each relevant factor be given equal weight. However with regard to whether the defendant was represented by a lawyer, had the right to a trial by jury, and received other due process protections consistent with the those provided to criminal defendants under the Constitution, the VAG urges the Commission to follow the holding in *US v Bryant*, 579 US\_\_ (2016), which held that since Bryant's tribal-court convictions occurred in proceedings that complied with the Indian Civil Rights Act and were valid when entered, and used as predicate offenses it did not violate the Constitution. As the Commission recalls, the ICRA does not require the accused to be represented by counsel. As a result, the VAG recommends that the Commission treat tribal court convictions the same as state and local offenses when computing criminal history points. With regard to the tribal sovereignty question on whether

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Tribes should opt in and provide the criminal history for tribal defendants, the VAG's position is that in cases where a victim is involved and the defendant has prior convictions in tribal court, those tribal convictions should be mandatory and part of any criminal history calculation.

With regard to court protection orders, the VAG supports the commentary of § 1B1.1 (Application Instructions) and the definition of court protection order derived from 18 USC § 2266(5) which is consistent with 18 USC § 2265(b). The most important factor for court protection orders, especially tribal court protection orders, is that they should be given the same full faith and credit as state or federal courts.

## II. Youthful Offenders

The VAG recommends that the Commission not adopt any changes on how the guidelines account for juvenile adjudications for the purposes of determining the defendant's criminal history. Specifically, the VAG is concerned that eliminating juvenile adjudications prior to age 18 will not give the court enough information determining whether that defendant shows prior criminal conduct, especially where those adjudications involve victims. The VAG is concerned that this amendment will limit consideration of only those juvenile convictions which occur prior to age 18 and are treated like adult convictions. Alternatively, if the Commission implements this change, the VAG strongly encourages all juvenile adjudications that involve a victim to be disclosed to the sentencing court.

## III. Criminal History

The VAG recommends that the Commission not change counting revocation sentences for the purpose of calculating criminal history points. The VAG is concerned that by changing the calculation, the resulting criminal history category would not accurately reflect the seriousness of the defendant's criminal history. Therefore, the VAG believes that all sentences upon revocation of probation, parole, supervised release, special parole or mandatory release should include the original term of imprisonment in addition to any term of imprisonment imposed upon the revocation, especially crimes involving victims.

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## **IV. Acceptance of Responsibility**

The VAG recommends that the Commission not amend the Commentary with regard to acceptance of responsibility under §3E.1 to include a non-frivolous challenge for relevant conduct. The VAG is concerned that the term “non-frivolous” is not defined and thus would not provide the clarity the Commission is seeking. This change would not be victim friendly. It could result in forcing the victim to testify in a mini-type trial with regard to the defendant’s challenge of an Acceptance of Responsibility adjustment. Moreover, this change would undermine finality for the victim. Furthermore, the VAG is concerned that there is not enough data or evidence to support this proposed change.

## **V. First Offenders**

The VAG recommends that the Commission adopt the proposed first offenders definition under §4C1.1(a). The VAG wants to maintain the status for a pattern of offenses. The VAG would like to exclude the following crimes from the operation of the proposed amendment.

**Exclusion:** Any offense which meets the definition of a crime of violence, as set out in §§4B1.2(a)(1) and (a)(2); §2B1.1 in which a specific victim or group of victims has been identified; §2B1.6; §2B2.1 (burglary of a residence); §2D2.3; §2G1.1; §2G1.3; §2G2.1; §2G2.2; §2G2.3; §2G2.6; §2G3.1 as it pertains to the transfer of obscene matter to a minor; §2H4.1; §2L1.1; and, §2X6.1. Any defendant who has prior criminal convictions for offenses which meet the definition of a crime of violence or which are the same or similar to an offense included in this listing but whose convictions are not used in the calculation of the criminal history category are excluded from consideration as a first time offender.

In light of all the proposed amendments, especially the amendment to the guideline sentencing table, it is the VAG’s assessment that the noted exceptions to the first time offender amendment should be applied. First time offenders who engage in crime(s) of violence, as defined under §4B1.2(a) have engaged in offenses which are clearly different from first time offenders whose offense of conviction has no element of violence and no victim(s) associated with their criminal conduct. The additional listing of specific sections of Chapter 2 of the Sentencing Guidelines has been provided because not all offenses involving victims fall into the definition of a crime of violence. In addition, as is presently proposed, a first time offender can be an individual who has engaged in serious criminal conduct but has not been criminally charged or convicted as a result

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of that behavior (i.e., college students who engage in repeated sexual assaults on campus and who are disciplined by the school but whose conduct has not been reported to law enforcement would technically be a first time offender under the proposed amendment. Likewise, individuals who purchase, view, and/or distribute child pornography may not have been previously convicted and would, again, technically qualify as a first time offender.)

Defendants who have a pattern of criminal behavior which includes crimes of violence or which is similar to the conduct listed in the recommended exclusion provision have demonstrated that they are not first time offenders, as the Commission would envision.

More importantly, the use of the exclusion provision provides the sentencing court with a mechanism that insures the victim's right to have all harms caused by the defendant's offense conduct taken into full consideration. The placement of the defendant in CHC I recognizes the defendant's status as a first time offender. The exclusion provision helps insure that a true distinction is drawn between first time offenders whose offense conduct does not seek to harm any individual and those offenders who specifically seek to harm others.

Finally, if the Commission does not support the new commentary the VAG supports option 1 to decrease the offense level by 1.

## **Conclusion**

The VAG appreciates the opportunity to address the victim related issues in relation to the impact of offenses. We hope that our collective views will assist the Commission in its deliberations on these important matters of public policy.

Should you have any further questions or require any clarification regarding the suggestions, please feel free to contact us.

Respectfully,

Victims Advisory Group  
February 2017