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NEWS RELEASE

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U.S. SENTENCING COMMISSION SELECTS POLICY PRIORITIES FOR 2013–2014 GUIDELINES AMENDMENT CYCLE

Continued Work on Mandatory Minimum Penalties, Review of Drug Guidelines on List of Priorities

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The United States Sentencing Commission today unanimously voted on its list of priorities for the coming year, including consideration of federal drug sentences and continued work on addressing concerns with mandatory minimum penalties.

The Commission set as its top priority continuing to work with Congress to implement the recommendations in its 2011 report on federal mandatory minimum penalties, which included recommendations that Congress reduce the severity and scope of mandatory minimum penalties and consider expanding the “safety valve” statute which exempts certain low-level non-violent offenders from mandatory minimum penalties.

The Commission also set out as an important new priority reviewing the sentencing guidelines applicable to drug offenses, including consideration of changing the guideline levels based on drug quantities. Drug offenders account for nearly half of all federal inmates, and an adjustment to the Drug Quantity Tables in the sentencing guidelines could have a significant impact on sentence lengths and prison populations.

“With a growing crisis in federal prison populations and budgets, it is timely and important for us to examine mandatory minimum penalties and drug sentences, which contribute significantly to the federal prison population,” Judge Patti Saris, Chair of the Commission, said. “These reviews are key components of the Commission’s ongoing work to further the goals of the Sentencing Reform Act that the federal sentencing scheme and the guidelines be flexible, certain, and fair.”

The Commission noted in its priorities a focus on fulfilling its statutory mandate to work to reduce overcapacity in federal prisons.

“The Commission is looking forward to a serious and thoughtful reconsideration of some of the sentencing guidelines which most strongly impact the federal criminal justice system,” Judge Saris said. “I am glad that members of Congress from both parties and the Attorney General are engaged in similar efforts.”

The Commission’s priorities include continued work on multi-year projects to review and potentially amend the guidelines governing economic crimes, to comprehensively study recidivism, and to review practices related to violations of probation and supervised release. The Commission will also study the statutory and guideline definitions of key sentencing terms including “crime of violence” and “drug trafficking offense.”

The Commission will also consider amending the policy statement pertaining to compassionate release, resolution of certain conflicting interpretations of the guidelines by federal courts, and implementation of the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 and other recently enacted crime legislation. It will continue work related to issues raised in its recent reports on child pornography offenses and on the continuing impact of the Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Booker*, which made the federal sentencing guidelines advisory.

The Commission annually identifies policy priorities in accordance with its statutory authority and responsibility to periodically review, analyze, and revise federal sentencing guidelines. The Commission published tentative priorities and invited public comment in May and received more than 14,000 letters of public comment in response.

In accordance with its stated priorities, the Commission will review current criminal justice research and federal sentencing statistics and conduct hearings and solicit comment to gather feedback from a wide variety of sources. It will then promulgate amendments to the United States Sentencing Guidelines, which will be sent to Congress by May 1, 2013.

More information about the final priorities may be found on the Commission’s website www.ussc.gov or in the August 20, 2013 edition of the *Federal Register*.

The United States Sentencing Commission, an independent agency in the judicial branch of the federal government, was organized in 1985 to develop national sentencing policy. The resulting federal sentencing guidelines provide the starting point for the court’s consideration of a sentence and help ensure that similar offenders who commit similar offenses receive similar sentences.

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