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Missouri Legislature Passes Corrections Reform Bill

JEFFERSON CITY — The Missouri Catholic Conference (MCC) applauds the Missouri General Assembly for passing [HB 192](#), an important corrections reform bill that could impact thousands of lives. HB 192, sponsored by [Rep. Bruce DeGroot \(R-Chesterfield\)](#), ends the practice of imprisoning people who can't afford to pay the costs associated with a previous stay in jail. This practice is particularly rampant in rural counties. The bill would do away with "show-cause" hearings, during which defendants must report to a judge every month to give updates on efforts to pay down jail debt. If the person does not show up to the hearing, a warrant could be issued for their arrest. The MCC supported the passage of this legislation throughout the 2019 legislative session.

Rep. DeGroot credited Tony Messenger of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for bringing to light this vicious cycle that has left many indigent people trapped in debtor's prison schemes. Defendants, too poor to pay off jail debts, often lost jobs, cars, and houses in the process of trying to pay what they owed. Rep. DeGroot also thanked [Rep. Mark Ellebracht \(D-Liberty\)](#) for his help with crafting the language of the bill. In March, the Missouri Supreme Court ruled in a unanimous decision that courts cannot threaten defendants with additional jail time if a defendant fails to pay bills associated with a prior jail stay. HB 192 will codify the prohibition into law. The measure passed the House of Representatives and the Senate with near-unanimous approval. "I feel this criminal justice reform bill is very important," DeGroot said. "As a practicing Catholic, I firmly believe how we treat the least of our people is a direct reflection on us as a society. I am very pleased with the support I've received from Governor Parson and the leadership team in the House of Representatives."

HB 192 also contains language that modifies criminal offenses that have minimum sentencing requirements. This language was contained in separate legislation sponsored by [Rep. Cody Smith \(R-Carthage\)](#), [Sen. Karla May \(D-St. Louis\)](#), and [Sen. Ed Emery \(R-Lamar\)](#). This language provides that minimum prison terms shall only apply to certain named offenses listed in the act, most involving violence or sexual assault. For all other crimes, judges would have the discretion to impose sentences whereby offenders would be eligible for parole, conditional release, or early release, rather than a statutorily-imposed jail sentence. Missouri's current minimum sentencing requirements increase the prison population, increase costs to the state, and can have a negative effect on recidivism. The Department of Corrections (DOC) estimates that this legislation could save the state \$5.8 million by Fiscal Year 2023. They further estimate that there will be a decrease in the state prison population of about 1,600 inmates by that time. The minimum prison term language was added to HB 192 in the Senate and was then approved by the House in their final passage of the bill. "This is very significant legislation," Rita Linhardt, who works on corrections legislation for the Missouri Catholic Conference, said. "It supports a restorative justice approach to crime that ensures the punishment fits the crime. Evidence suggests that it is the certainty of being caught, not the severity of the punishment, that deters future crime."

The bill will now be sent to Governor Parson for his signature.