June 22, 2023

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor, District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20004

Re: Local and National Organizations Oppose Safer Stronger DC Amendment Act of 2023

Dear Mayor Bowser and D.C. Councilmembers:

We, the undersigned civil rights, criminal justice reform, youth justice, democracy, philanthropic leaders and organizations, many with offices and staff in Washington, D.C. and who share a commitment to ending mass incarceration, are writing to you today out of concern about the Safer Stronger DC Amendment Act (SSDC), which is scheduled for a hearing before the D.C. Council. We oppose this bill as currently written because evidence and history has shown that we cannot incarcerate our way to public safety. In fact, making our criminal justice systems harsher and subjecting more people to pretrial incarceration and excessively long sentences has multi-generational destructive and destabilizing effects on communities without effectively reducing violence.

D.C.’s criminal justice system already has some of the worst racial disparities and highest rates of incarceration in the country. Black D.C. residents are 21 times more likely to be incarcerated than white residents.1 Thousands of people are already serving excessively long sentences that separate families, destabilize communities and exacerbate already existing inequalities in the District, without making any of us safer.2

While we oppose the bill overall, we take particular issue with the following three of SSDC’s provisions that reproduce the same, failed policies that delivered us mass incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s and will only aggravate disparities in D.C.’s criminal justice system:

1. Creating mandatory minimums and sentence enhancements;
2. Expanding the number of adults and youth incarcerated pre-trial even though they are presumed innocent; and
3. Rolling back D.C.’s “second look” provisions that allows courts to review unduly harsh sentences for people who have already served well over a decade and have demonstrated rehabilitation.

1 FWD.us analysis of D.C. Residents in Federal Bureau of Prisons Custody at the end of August 2022, available via the District of Columbia Justice Statistical Analysis Tool (DC JSAT) at https://www.dcjsat.net/FBOP.html, and Washington, D.C. population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, July 2022. Analysis was limited to individuals in secure institutions and does not account for D.C. residents in residential reentry confinement.

Public safety and reducing incarceration go hand in hand and we need evidence-based policies that reflect that truth. The harmful impact of these proposals is not speculative — we have decades of evidence that these punitive policies are not only wrong, but will make us less safe while locking up more, predominately Black Washingtonians. **D.C. voters overwhelmingly support reducing the jail and prison populations**, including nearly 87% of Black D.C. residents. D.C. needs to continue moving forward towards reducing incarceration and creating a fairer criminal justice system — the SSDC would be a devastating step in the wrong direction.

We urge D.C. elected officials to follow the robust data that shows us that increasing incarceration will not make us safer and instead prioritize policies that will improve public safety, reduce incarceration, and strengthen communities.

*Signed,*

The Advancement Project  
ACLU DC  
Alliance for Safety and Justice  
The Bail Project  
Black Lives Matter DC  
Black Public Defender Association  
Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth  
Center for Legal and Evidence-Based Practices  
The Community  
DC Action  
DC For Democracy  
DC Justice Lab  
DC Statehood Green Party  
Drug Policy Alliance  
Fair Budget Coalition  
FAMM  
Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop  
FWD.us  
Galaxy Gives  
The Gault Center  
Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative  
Harriet's Wildest Dreams  
Just Future Project  
JustLeadership USA  
JustUS Coordinating Council  
Justice Policy Institute  
League of Women Voters DC  
Minnesota Freedom Fund  
More Than Our Crimes  
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF)  
National Council of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls  
Neighbors for Justice  
ONE DC  
Open City Advocates  
Partners for Justice  
Prison Policy Initiative  
Public Defender Coalition for Immigrant Justice  
Public Justice Center  
ReThink Justice D.C.  
School Justice Project  
Second Look Project  
The Sentencing Project  
Vera Institute  
Zealous