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of the
JUDICIAL CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES
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Honorable Paul Cassell, Chair

March 16, 2007

Honorable Ricardo H. Hinojosa, Chair
United States Sentencing Commission
One Columbus Circle, N.E.
Suite 2-500, South Lobby
Washington, D.C. 20002-8002

Re: Comments on Sentencing Commission Amendments: Incorporation of Mandatory Minimum Terms of Imprisonment created or increased by the Adam Walsh Child Protection Act of 2006

Dear Chairman Hinojosa,

The Criminal Law Committee of the Judicial Conference is pleased to respond to the U.S. Sentencing Commission's Notice of Proposed Amendments, Request for Public Comment, and Notice of Public Hearings for the amendment cycle ending May 1, 2007.¹ While the Committee recognizes that the Commission is considering several important revisions to the guidelines, we would like to focus on one issue that we believe impacts the fair administration of justice. Specifically, the Committee believes that when the Commission is promulgating base offense levels for guidelines used for offenses with mandatory minimums, the Commission should set the base offense level irrespective of the mandatory minimum term of imprisonment that may be imposed by statute.

¹ 72 Fed. Reg. 4372-4398 (Jan. 30, 2007).

On July 27, 2006, the President signed the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 into law.² Among the many provisions in the Act were several new or increased mandatory minimum terms of imprisonment. The Commission has offered four options to harmonize the new and enhanced mandatory penalties with the base offense levels of the guideline system:

First, the Commission can set the base offense level to correspond to the first offense level on the sentencing table with a guideline range in excess of the mandatory minimum. Historically, this is the approach the Commission has taken with respect to drug offenses. For example, a 10-year mandatory minimum would correspond to a base offense level of 32 (121 - 151 months).

Second, the Commission can set the base offense level such that the guideline range is the first on the sentencing table to include the mandatory minimum term of imprisonment at any point within the range. Under this approach, a 10-year mandatory minimum would correspond to a base offense level of 31 (108 - 135 months).

Third, the Commission could set the base offense level such that the corresponding guideline range is lower than the mandatory minimum term of imprisonment but then anticipate that certain frequently applied specific offense characteristics would increase the offense level and corresponding guideline range to encompass the mandatory minimum. The Commission took this approach in 2004 when it implemented the PROTECT Act.

Fourth, the Commission could decide not to change the base offense levels and allow §5G1.1(b) to operate. Section 5G1.1(b) provides that if a mandatory minimum term of imprisonment is greater than the maximum of the applicable guideline range, the statutorily required minimum sentence shall be the guideline sentence.³

The Criminal Law Committee has considered each of the options offered by the Commission, and believes that Option Four, with a slight modification, is the preferred method to employ when promulgating guidelines to be used in conjunction with mandatory minimum terms of imprisonment. The Committee believes that the Commission should set the base offense level, irrespective of the mandatory minimum, and furthermore encourages the Commission to review each base offense level affected by the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 to ensure that, in the Commission's own expert opinion, the levels adequately address the seriousness of the offenses.

² Public Law No. 109-248 (July 27, 2006).

³ 72 Fed. Reg. 4382 (Jan. 30, 2007).

The Judicial Conference has a long history of opposing mandatory minimum terms of imprisonment.⁴ The basis of the Conference's position is that not only do mandatory minimums unnecessarily limit judicial discretion, but that they interfere with the operation of the Sentencing Reform Act and may, in fact, create unwarranted sentencing disparity.⁵ The Conference supports the Sentencing Commission's role as an independent commission in the judicial branch charged with establishing sentencing policies for the federal criminal justice system.⁶ The Conference, like the Commission, has opposed efforts by the Congress to directly amend the sentencing guidelines, and favors allowing the Commission to amend the guidelines based on its own expert opinion.⁷ While the Commission must respect the intent of Congress when promulgating guidelines, the Conference believes that the Commission is also obligated to make an independent assessment of what the appropriate sentence should be. For these reasons, the Committee does not support Options One or Two.

Likewise, the Committee can not support Option Three. Although the Commission does not propose to set the base offense level to correspond to the mandatory minimum term of imprisonment, the Commission explains that the intent is to still arrive at a guideline range at or above the mandatory minimum term of imprisonment by combining the base offense level with several frequently anticipated specific offense characteristics. The Commission has noted that this was the method used to promulgate guideline amendments in 2004, following the passage of the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today Act of 2003 (the PROTECT Act).⁸ However, in a March 8, 2004, letter, then Committee Chair, Hon. Sim Lake, informed the Commission that the Committee opposed such an approach. While the Committee

⁴ See, e.g., JCUS-SEP 53, p. 28; JCUS-SEP 61, p. 98; JCUS-MAR 62, p. 22; JCUS-MAR 65, p. 20; JCUS-SEP 67, p. 79; JCUS-OCT 71, p. 40; JCUS-APR 76, p. 10; JCUS-SEP 81, p. 90; JCUS-MAR 90, p. 16; JCUS-SEP 90, p. 62; JCUS-SEP 91, pp. 45, 56; JCUS-MAR 93, p. 13.

⁵ See JCUS-MAR 90, p. 16 (paraphrasing the recommendation of the Criminal Law Committee to "reconsider the wisdom of mandatory minimum sentencing statutes and restructure them in such a way that the Sentencing Commission may uniformly establish guidelines for all criminal statutes in order to avoid unwarranted sentencing disparity" as contemplated by the Sentencing Reform Act); see also Speech of Justice Stephen Breyer, *Federal Sentencing Guidelines Revisited* (Nov. 18, 1998), reprinted at 11 FED. SENT. REP. 180 (1999):

[S]tatutory mandatory sentences prevent the Commission from carrying out its basic, congressionally mandated task: the development, in part through research, of a rational, coherent set of punishments.... Every system, after all, needs some kind of escape valve for unusual cases.... For this reason, the Guideline system is a stronger, more effective sentencing system in practice. In sum, Congress, in simultaneously requiring Guideline sentencing and mandatory minimum sentencing, is riding two different horses. And those horses, in terms of coherence, fairness, and effectiveness, are traveling in opposite directions. [In my view, Congress should] abolish mandatory minimums altogether.

Id. at 184-85.

⁶ 28 U.S.C. § 991.

⁷ JCUS-SEP 03, pp. 5-6

⁸ Public Law No. 108-21.

acknowledged the need to address proportionality concerns as a result of the PROTECT Act's many mandatory minimum provisions and direct amendments, the Committee stated that it believed that "the goal of proportionality should not become a one-way ratchet for increasing sentences."⁹ The Commission should not feel obligated to follow the approach it used following the enactment of the PROTECT Act since even Congress contemplated the need to revisit the implementation of the Act after some time.¹⁰

It is the view of the Criminal Law Committee that Option Four represents the best approach to harmonizing what are essentially two competing approaches to criminal sentencing (i.e., a matrix of a comprehensive sentencing guideline system and a collection of powerful but indiscriminate blunderbuss of mandatory minimum sentences). Where mandatory minimum sentences are applicable, they must be imposed, of course, thereby trumping the guideline system. But it is the view of the Judicial Conference that mandatory minimum sentences are less prudent and less efficient than guideline sentencing,¹¹ and that a system of sentencing guidelines, developed and promulgated by the expert Commission, should remain the foundation of punishment in the federal system. The guideline system should operate as the principal means of establishing criminal penalties for violations of federal law, and the Sentencing Reform Act's principles of parity, proportionality, and parsimony should be observed wherever possible. Thus, Option Four appears to best preserve the primacy of the guidelines as a coherent system, and to avoid injustices that may stem from efforts to engraft meaningful guidelines upon a framework of mandatory minimum sentences.

There is another rationale for establishing meaningful base offense levels without keying these to applicable mandatory minimum sentences: the need to provide meaningful benchmarks for cases in which mandatory minimum penalties do not apply. Setting the base offense level at or near the guideline range that includes the mandatory minimum, as is often seen in drug cases, often leaves the court without guidance on what the appropriate guideline range should be in cases where the mandatory minimum term does not apply. For example, for mandatory minimum offenses covered by §2D1.1, the Commission has set the base offense level, as determined by the drug quantity table, so that the resulting offense level meets or exceeds the mandatory minimum; however, in cases where either §§5K1.1 or 5C1.2 apply, the courts are left with little guidance on what the appropriate sentence should be. If the Commission were to independently set the base offense level to reflect the seriousness of the offense, in its own expert opinion and irrespective of the mandatory minimum term of imprisonment, then the courts would have some benchmark to use when the mandatory minimum would not apply.

⁹ Letter from Hon. Sim Lake, Chair of the Judicial Conference Committee on Criminal Law to Members of the Sentencing Commission, March 8, 2004.

¹⁰ See, Public Law No. 108-21, Title IV, § 401(j)(2), authorizing the Commission to promulgate amendments after May 1, 2005, to certain sections of the sentencing guidelines revised by the PROTECT Act.

¹¹ See, JCUS-APR 76, p. 10; JCUS-SEP 81, pp. 90, 93.

Of course, the fact that Congress has raised a mandatory minimum sentence for a particular offense is something that the Sentencing Commission must consider, along with all other relevant factors, in exercising its expert judgment on what an appropriate sentence for an offense might be. In raising a mandatory minimum, Congress may be signaling its view that existing guidelines have, at least in some cases, produced sentences that were too low. It is also frequently the case that in raising a mandatory minimum sentence, Congress will have held hearings or published reports explaining the seriousness of a particular offense. These materials will often provide useful information to the Sentencing Commission in reviewing Guideline levels and should be given careful consideration.

Accordingly, the Committee recommends that the Commission should make an assessment of the adequacy of the existing guidelines, independent of any potentially applicable mandatory minimums and adjust the guidelines as the Commission deems appropriate. If the resulting guideline is less than any potentially applicable mandatory minimum sentence, §5G1.1(b) should be utilized to allow for imposition of that statutorily-required sentence.

We appreciate the opportunity to present our views. If you need additional information, please feel free to contact me at (801) 524-3005, or Judge Reggie B. Walton at (202) 354-3290.

Sincerely,

A black and white photograph of a handwritten signature, which appears to read "Paul Cassell", on a piece of paper with a grid pattern.

Paul Cassell