

Joint statement | Opposition to Senate Bill 913 (PN 1144)

Pennsylvania has the [second highest](#) percentage of its citizens on probation and parole in the country and the [highest incarceration rate](#) in the northeast. More than [50%](#) of people sent to state prison each year are there for supervision violations and many of the people held in our jails pretrial are incarcerated on probation and parole [detainers](#). Pennsylvania clearly has not only a mass incarceration problem, it has a mass supervision problem.

Probation was originally intended to be an alternative to incarceration. And yet, Pennsylvania's probation system feeds our mass incarceration problem.

Last session, Senate Bill 14 [originally proposed](#) several fundamental structural changes to Pennsylvania's broken probation system, but those reforms were lost after SB 14 was [amended](#). With the start of a new session, we were hopeful the senate would consider reintroducing at least some of those vital reforms.

Unfortunately, [Senate Bill 913 \(PN 1144\)](#) changed little from last session's bill—it fails to address the core problems plaguing Pennsylvania's probation system and would amend current law in ways that **risk making probation worse** in Pennsylvania.

No bill is perfect, especially those that weather bipartisan negotiation and compromise. However, when considering legislation that aims to improve probation in Pennsylvania, we must consider its potential impact.

Below is our assessment of Senate Bill 913.

Based on this assessment, we urge our state legislators to oppose Senate Bill 913 (PN 1144).

Fails to reform

Mixed reform

Positive reform

REAL REFORM: Would proposed reforms actually reduce mass supervision in Pennsylvania?

Any reform legislation should seek to fix the underlying drivers of excessive supervision in Pennsylvania with solutions informed by data, research, and best practices. Specifically, reform legislation should limit, reduce, or restrict probation terms and/or probation revocation.

1. Does the bill limit the amount of time a person can be sentenced to probation?

The sheer length of probation terms is the primary driver of Pennsylvania's probation problem, and any meaningful reform legislation **must** limit the amount of time people can be sentenced to probation.

SB 913:

- Fails to cap the amount of time people can be sentenced to probation. Instead, SB 913 proposes "probation review conferences" at 3 years for misdemeanors and 5 years for felony offenses.
- Does not prohibit consecutive sentences of probation (sentences served back-to-back).
- Does not prohibit split sentences (sentencing someone to a probation term to be served *after* incarceration). In fact, SB 913 *reaffirms* the use of split sentences.

2. Does the bill reduce the amount of time a person can spend on probation?

If hard limits to probation terms are unattainable or significantly compromised, there **must** be alternative ways to reduce the amount of time someone spends on probation.

SB 913:

- Does not reduce the length of a *probation sentence* upon completion of educational or vocational achievements. Instead, SB 913 only permits those achievements to be used to reduce the amount of time before a person is eligible for a probation review conference, with no guarantee of termination.
- Does not permit *automatic* early termination of probation. Instead, SB 913 presumes that judges will accept recommendations from probation officers, including for early termination, as long as no one objects and the person meets the strict eligibility requirements to even be considered for termination.

3. Does the bill restrict the court's ability to revoke or incarcerate following a technical violation?

Technical violations occur when a person breaks any of the numerous and often burdensome rules of probation—behavior which would otherwise not be considered a crime. Technical violations can result in having probation revoked, extending a person's probation, or even sending them to jail or prison for weeks, months, even years.

SB 913:

- ✗ Fails to restrict the court's ability to revoke probation for technical violations and codifies hearings intended to make it easier to revoke probation for a new alleged crime by pursuing it via a technical violation. This avoids the "hassle" of securing a conviction for a new offense, allowing people to be locked up for *uncharged* and *unsubstantiated allegations* of criminal misconduct.
- ✗ Fails to restrict the court's ability to incarcerate someone for a technical violation. Although SB 913 eliminates a widely abused provision that allows judges to incarcerate people in order to "vindicate the authority of the court," SB 913 also explicitly creates **new authority to incarcerate** people who have broken a rule of their probation.
- ~ Prohibits extending or revoking probation for people financially unable to pay **fines**. However, SB 913 specifically allows a court to deny termination based on unpaid **restitution** and creates "administrative probation" to keep people who owe restitution on probation indefinitely.
- ~ Establishes graduated sanctions after first and second technical violations; but then allows the court to ignore those limits to keep people in jail while they wait weeks, even months, for a drug or mental health evaluation and/or placement in a treatment program or problem-solving court.
- ✓ Revises a condition of probation to make it harder to violate a person for simply "leaving the jurisdiction." Leaving would require intent to flee or avoid supervision to qualify as a violation.

DO NO (MORE) HARM: Do reforms include any new provisions that could lock up more people?

Any reform proposal must avoid creating new punishments or provisions that put more people in jail or prison, either explicitly or through expanded powers granted to courts or prosecutors.

SB 913:

- ✗ Weakens the protection against incarceration in current law, changing "shall not" incarcerate to "may" incarcerate, making it easier for judges to jail or imprison people following a revocation of probation.
- ✗ Grants the court new and expanded authority to incarcerate people for a long list of technical violations—some of which identify conduct that would, or *should*, qualify as a new offense but masquerade as "technical" violations; others would incarcerate people for breaking common rules of probation.
- ✗ Creates "administrative probation" to keep people who owe restitution on probation indefinitely.

CLEAR: Are proposed reforms clearly defined? Will changes be easy to follow and implement?

Reform measures should avoid further complicating an already convoluted process. Changes that are too complex or burdensome, unnecessary or duplicative, or narrowly or exclusively defined, make successful implementation less likely and reform measures largely meaningless.

SB 913:

- ✗ Creates "probation review conferences"—a process that complicates an already complex system and distracts from tackling the core problems of our broken probation system. Under [current law](#), judges may already terminate probation at any time, for any reason, for any offense; and it allows for probation review hearings at any time, including by petition of the probationer. In other words, current law already provides a straightforward off-ramp from probation. By contrast, instead of an off-ramp, SB 913 creates a maze of "probation review conferences" intended only to *consider* terminations of probation. These review conferences are largely inaccessible, nearly impossible to navigate, and shot through with exceptions and conditions. This is not reform. It is a solution in search of a problem—an unnecessary, convoluted process that will only help the handful of people who survive its gauntlet.

We, the undersigned, urge our state legislators to oppose Senate Bill 913 (PN 1144):

Signatories to Joint Statement in Opposition to Senate Bill 913 (PN 1144)

Organization	Name	Title
1 1Hood	Miracle Jones	Director of Policy & Advocacy
2 Abolitionist Law Center	Robert Saleem Holbrook	Executive Director
3 ACLU of Pennsylvania	Elizabeth Randol	Legislative Director
4 AIDS Law Project	Ronda Goldfein, Esq.	Executive Director
5 Alliance for Police Accountability	Kyna James	Coalition Organizer
6 Amistad Law Project	Kris Henderson	Executive Director
7 Better PA	Jenna Henry	Deputy Director
8 Casa San Jose	Monica Ruiz	Executive Director
9 Coalition Against Death By Incarceration (CADBI)–Delaware Co.	Dana Lomax-Ayler	President
10 Color of Change	Megan French-Marcelin	Campaign Director, Criminal Justice & Democracy
11 Dauphin County Bail Fund	Alex Domingos	Board Chair
12 Defender Association of Philadelphia	Keisha Hudson	Chief Defender
13 Dignity Act Now Collective	Madusa Carter	Co-Founder
14 Dignity and Power Now	Lex Stepling	Director of Policy & Campaigns
15 Disability Rights Pennsylvania	Peri Jude Radecic	Chief Executive Officer
16 Educating Communities for Parenting	Anita Kulick	President & CEO
17 Exodus Prison and Aftercare Ministries	Philip Edward Yevics, Ph.D.	Acting Secretary
18 Friends Association	Jennifer Lopez	Executive Director
19 Frontline Dads	Reuben Jones	Executive Director
20 HIAS Pennsylvania	Cathryn Miller-Wilson	Executive Director
21 HUB for Progress	Jordi Comas	Facilitator
22 Institute for Community Justice	Assata Thomas	Director
23 Juvenile Law Center	Susan Vivian Mangold	CEO
24 Lancaster Stands Up	Eliza Booth	Organizer
25 League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania	Sarah Miller	Director, Social Policy
26 Lehigh Valley Justice Institute	Joe Welsh	Founder & Executive Director
27 Mary's Daughter for the Formerly Incarcerated	Madusa Carter	Founder & Executive Director
28 Maternity Care Coalition	Sara Jann	Director of Policy & Advocacy

29	National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women	Jenn Richards	Interim Executive Director
30	Nationalities Service Center	Steven Larin	Deputy Director
31	New Voices for Reproductive Justice	Carmen Alexander	Deputy Director of Operations
32	Ortiz Ark Foundation	Jessica Lee Ortiz	Executive Director
33	PA Budget and Policy Center	Nick Pressley	Director of Campaigns
34	PA Council of Churches	Rev. Sandy Strauss	Director of Advocacy & Ecumenical Outreach
35	People's Paper Co-op	Courtney Bowles	Co-Director
36	Philadelphia Bail Fund	Malik Neal	Executive Director
37	Philadelphia Community Bail Fund	Candace McKinley	Lead Organizer
38	Philadelphia Justice Project for Women & Girls	Jill McCorkel, Ph.D.	Founder & Executive Director
39	Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity	Renee Chenault Fattah	Executive Director
40	Philadelphia Reentry Think Tank	Mark Strandquist	Co-Director
41	Power Lehigh Valley–End Mass Incarceration	Robert Walden	Chair
42	Public Defender Association of PA	Brian L. Deiderick	President
43	Reclaim Philadelphia	A'Brianna Morgan	Mass Liberation Organizer
44	Sankofa Healing Studio	Jacqui Johnson	Founder & Clinical Director
45	SEAMAAC, Inc.	Thoai Nguyen	CEO
46	SELF! Lehigh Valley	Enid Santiago	Board Chair
47	Sisters Returning Home	Peggy Simms	Executive Director
48	Sound Community Solutions	Min. Vladimir Beaufiles, CRS, CGS, OWDS	Founder/President & CEO
49	Support Center for Child Advocates	Frank Cervone	Executive Director
50	Take Action Mon Valley (TAMV)	Fawn Montgomery	Executive Director
51	The Wardrobe	Sheri Cole	Executive Director
52	We the People–PA	Nick Pressley	Campaign Director
53	West End P.O.W.E.R.	Terri Minor Spencer	President
54	West Philly Participatory Defense Hub	Betsy Elliot	Core Member
55	Why Not Prosper	Rev. Dr. Michelle Simmons	Founder & CEO
56	Women's Medical Fund	Elicia Gonzales	Executive Director