



November 30, 2016

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

In these final days of the 114th Congress, we urge you to continue bipartisan efforts to reach an agreement on meaningful mental health reform, provide the necessary resources for the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and take action to improve our criminal justice system.

Pope Francis has urged that, “[f]resh drinking water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. . . . One particularly serious problem is the quality of water available to the poor. Every day, unsafe water results in many deaths and the spread of water-related diseases, including those caused by microorganisms and chemical substances” (*Laudato Si’* nos. 28-29). As unthinkable as it may be in a nation like our own, we note how the lingering environmental and public health crisis in Flint, Michigan has contaminated drinking water, and seriously impacted the health and well-being of those already experiencing deep levels of poverty.

During his visit to the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia last year, the Holy Father said: “Any society, any family that cannot share or take seriously the pain of its children, and views that pain as something normal or expected, is a society condemned to remain hostage to itself, prey to the very things which cause that pain.” The pain of mental health problems—personal, familial, communal—permeate our encounters with the poor: 26 percent of homeless adults living in shelters suffer from serious mental illness, and 30 percent of those discharged from psychiatric hospitals end up homeless within six months of release. The mental health challenges we face in America are ever-present in our justice system as well. According to one Bureau of Justice Statistics report, more than half of all prison and jail inmates in the United States have a mental health problem. This reality weighs heavily upon the already over-burdened criminal justice system, a system which policy advocates across the ideological spectrum now agree is in need of serious reform.

As Pope Francis reminds us, “We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.” He called for a “civilization of love” and a “culture of care” in society and politics, for such an intervention is “an exercise of charity” that “matures and sanctifies us.”

Throughout the 114th Congress, laudable bipartisan progress has been made to address the situation in Flint (S.2848/H.R. 5303), improve our mental health care programs (S. 2680/H.R. 2646) and reform our criminal justice system (S.2123/H.R. 3713, H.R. 759 and H.R. 3406). However, without congressional action during these final weeks of this Congress, these bipartisan efforts will be lost. We therefore urge you to prioritize these issues and pass bipartisan legislation on these vital matters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank J. Dewane".

Most Reverend Frank J. Dewane
Bishop of Venice
Chairman
Committee on Domestic Justice and
Human Development

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donna J. Markham, OP, Ph.D.". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Sr. Donna Markham, OP, Ph.D.
President and CEO
Catholic Charities USA