To: Governor Chris Christie and the Members of the New Jersey Legislature

We, the undersigned faith leaders, urge you to do everything in your power to make Senate Bill 761 / Assembly Bill 1986 the law in New Jersey. This common sense legislation would facilitate the release of nonviolent offenders from prison at their first parole eligibility date, provided that they commit no serious disciplinary infractions and participate in rehabilitation programming while incarcerated.

Over the last thirty years, New Jersey’s prison population has grown at an unprecedented rate, driven largely by significant increases in both the use of imprisonment, especially for nonviolent drug offenders, as well as sentence lengths. As the number of incarcerated individuals has risen, so too has state spending on corrections, often at the expense of other necessary expenditures. For instance, the corrections budget has grown at three times the rate of spending on education over the last three decades.

At the moment, administrative delays and institutional inefficiencies mean that offenders often remain in prison long after they become eligible for parole. This puts additional stress on our already over-burdened correctional institutions, wastes state money, and needlessly and unjustly punishes the offender. Most importantly, New Jersey’s increasing reliance on incarceration has produced gross racial disparities in application and generated a host of other disastrous social and economic consequences.

As faith leaders, we are often firsthand observers of these tragic consequences. We see African Americans and Latinos going to prison in record numbers, only to return and find themselves hopelessly discriminated against in the legitimate labor market. Indeed, the overriding practical effect of sending high concentrations of these already marginalized individuals to prison is a never-ending cycle of disadvantage and social breakdown that negatively impacts those incarcerated, their families and their wider communities. Many individuals would be better off serving shorter sentences followed by a release to drug treatment, counseling or other community supervision services that would enable them to reconnect with family members and work towards becoming positive and productive members of society.

Ensuring the safety and well-being of our communities is our highest priority. Lengthy and unnecessary terms of incarceration do not serve these objectives and simply prolong the isolation of offenders from their families and communities, further compounding the challenges they will eventually face in their inevitable reintegration. Morality, compassion and common sense dictate that we pass Senate Bill 761 / Assembly Bill 1986 as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,

Pastor Bryant Ali, New Psalmist Worship Center
Rev. Gedeon Aybar, Iglesia El Shaddai, Jersey City
Rev. Darrell Armstrong, Shiloh Baptist Church
Rev. William Caban, Defender of Christian Faith, Bayonne
Pastor Joe Carter, New Hope Baptist Church, Newark

Rev. Rob Gregson, UU Legislative Ministry of New Jersey
Pastor Francis Huber, First Christian Assembly
Pastor Verenander L. Hughes, Bethel Baptist Church
Rev. Michael J. Jordan, Mt. Olive Baptist Church of East Orange
Dr. J. Stanley Justice, Greater Mt. Zion Church

Continued on next page
Rev. William Coleman, Second Baptist Church, Asbury Park
Rev. Errol Cooper, First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens
Rev. Gabriel Cuervo, The Nazarine Church, Jersey City
Rabbi Faith Joy Dantowitz, Temple B’nai Abraham
Rabbi Matthew D. Gewirtz, Congregation B’nai Jeshurun
Rev. Doris Glaspy, Roseville Presbyterian Church
Rev. Carol S. Haag, Unitarian Universalist Minister, retired Murray Grove Stewardship Committee Chair
Rev. Karen Hernandez-Granzen, Westminster Presbyterian Church
Rev. Tomas Reyes, Iglesia Fuente De Salvacion, Jersey City
Rev. John W. Rice, Love Fellowship MBC
Rev. Bruno Rodriquez, Church of God, Jersey City
Wahy-ud Deen Shareef, Imam
Pastor Ronald Slaughter, St. James AME Church
Cantor Howard Stahl, Congregation B’nai Jeshurun
Rabbi Joshua Stanton, Congregation B’nai Jeshurun
Rev. Jose Lopez, Iglesia Cristiana Avivamiento Pentecostal, Union City

Rev. Jose Lopez, Iglesia Cristiana Avivamiento Pentecostal Church, Jersey City
Dr. Calvin McKinney, National Baptist Convention
Rev. Cedric McKoy, Beulah Grove Baptist Church
Rev. Bill Neely, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton
Rev. Ronald Owens, New Hope Baptist Church, Metuchen
Rabbi Karen Perolman, Congregation B’nai Jeshurun
Rev. Juan Peterson, Angel Visit Baptist Church
Rev. Sunilda Ramos, Iglesia Del Avivamiento, Union City
Rev. JerQuentin Sutton, Lebanon Baptist Church & Social Action Chair, United Missionary Baptist Convention, Inc.
Rev. Ariel Torres, Monte Sinai, Newark
Rev. David Torres, The Path to Heaven, Long Branch
Rabbi Jesse Olitzky
Dr. Vernon C. Walton, Mt. Calvary Baptist Church
Pastor Austin Whitaker, Calvary Community Rebirth Ministries
Rev. Kenneth D.R. Clayton, St. Luke Baptist Church