



## COALITION ON HUMAN NEEDS

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January 10, 2017

The Honorable Charles Grassley  
Chair, Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
135 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein  
Ranking Member, Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
331 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Grassley and Feinstein:

On behalf of the [Coalition on Human Needs](http://www.chn.org), I am writing to express our opposition to the nomination of Senator Jefferson Sessions for Attorney General. The mission of the Coalition on Human Needs is to advocate to meet the needs of low-income and vulnerable people. African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, people with disabilities, ex-offenders, LGBTQ people, and single mothers are among those disproportionately likely to be poor. In addition, certain religious minorities, most recently including Muslims, are vulnerable to illegal discrimination and exclusion. The Attorney General of the United States must enforce the Constitution and the laws of this nation to ensure that those among us with the least power and money, and who may be most likely to experience discrimination and crimes of hate, are protected. We regret that Senator Sessions' long record includes repeated examples of his willingness to target rather than protect the most vulnerable.

**Voting Rights:** The Attorney General must vigorously enforce our laws to protect the right to vote. Senator Sessions instead, as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Alabama in the mid-1980's, brought to trial an unsupportable case against three African American community activists for voter fraud, which was quickly rejected by jurors. The prosecution targeted members of the Perry County Civic League, a nonprofit organization that assisted poor, rural, and elderly residents with food, medical, education and other needs. The voting assistance provided by the defendants was authoritatively judged to be legal. Attorney Sessions instead asserted that assistance to voters, despite being voluntarily sought, was illegal. In the words of then defense-team member [Deval Patrick](#), the presiding Judge in the trial, Emmett Cox, at the

outset "...rejected that theory as contrary to settled law and the Constitution." The power of the federal government must not be used to intimidate low-income communities of color or anyone else seeking to exercise their right to vote through unwarranted prosecution, but that is exactly what then U.S. Attorney Sessions did. His more recent comments that the Voting Rights Act is "intrusive" suggest a continued unwillingness to enforce the laws to protect our most sacred right.

**Disability Rights:** We ally ourselves with the [letter](#) from members of the advocacy community on behalf of people with disabilities recently sent to you, which detailed nominee Sessions' history in opposing protections and services for people with disabilities. As Alabama's Attorney General, he fought to eliminate consent decrees related to Alabama's treatment of children with mental illness and intellectual and developmental disabilities within its child welfare and mental health/developmental disabilities systems. As Senator, he has criticized the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), voted against ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (strongly supported by former Senator Bob Dole) and against the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (which included crimes motivated by the victim's disability as hate crimes).

**Criminal Justice Reform:** There is now growing bipartisan support for reducing sentences, in particular for drug offenses, and for providing more supports and assistance for those returning to communities from the criminal justice system. Senator Sessions has opposed initiatives to shorten sentences, including a thus far successful effort to block the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, sponsored by Senators Grassley, Lee, and Cornyn, among others. We urge you to study the report released by the Brennan Center: [Analysis: Sen. Jeff Sessions's Record on Criminal Justice](#) for much documentation. The report details his shifting of prosecutorial resources away from violent crime and towards drug offenses while U.S. Attorney. The nation needs a significant commitment to expanded treatment for substance use, not a return to costly and ineffectual prosecution and incarceration.

A critical part of criminal justice reform is better oversight of police practices. The Brennan report cites the Justice Department's report last August on Baltimore, MD's police department, which found "a pattern of violations of residents' rights, particularly in poor, predominantly black neighborhoods." Similarly, the Justice Department has investigated the police in Ferguson, Missouri and found patterns of bias, leading to a consent decree with the department for training of its officers to avoid the use of force and to overhaul the municipal court system to reduce the use of municipal criminal justice fines. Senator Sessions has been highly critical of consent decrees, calling them "one of the most dangerous, and rarely discussed, exercises of raw power" in a forward to a 2008 [Alabama Policy Institute paper](#). The Justice Department ought to be a force to redress the unjust exercises of raw power within police departments against vulnerable communities. Senator Sessions appears to be intent on rolling back the positive role the Justice Department has recently played.

**Immigration Reform:** Senator Sessions has opposed bipartisan efforts to enact immigration reforms. The Attorney General above all should recognize that justice suffers in this country if immigrant members of our community are denied reasonable access to the protections of law. The Attorney General should vigorously enforce laws protecting workers and protecting against municipal targeting of immigrants for minor violations in order to collect fees and fines. Instead of seeking a reasonable solution, Senator Sessions would leave immigrants vulnerable and would in so doing compromise the rights of all workers.

The Attorney General of the United States, in order to ensure that all Americans enjoy equal treatment and protection under the law, must be forceful and affirmative in combatting discrimination by race, gender, religion, immigrant status, disability, or poverty. As noted, Senator Sessions has instead throughout his career sought to deny protections to these vulnerable groups. He has in addition appeared to support a ban on Muslims entering the U.S., has even questioned whether grabbing a woman's private parts would be considered sexual assault and opposed the 2014 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act.

We respectfully urge you to consider these and more disturbing aspects of Senator Sessions' record and hope that the Judiciary Committee and the Senate will oppose his nomination.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deborah Weinstein", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Deborah Weinstein  
Executive Director