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The nation's criminal justice system "is in need of reform" and the First Step Act "is a worthy 'first step' in the right direction," said Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

In a Dec. 20 statement, he called the measure and support for it "a model of bipartisan collaboration and good policymaking."

Dewane praised the Senate for passing the bill 87-12 in a vote late Dec. 18 and urged the House "to do likewise."

"As we approach the Nativity of our Lord, we are reminded of the need to promote justice and mercy in our society," he added.

Dewane outlined some of the provisions of the First Step Act that he said would bring "much-needed reforms for the federal prison system."

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Those include: sentencing reform for those incacercerated; strongly limiting the practice of shackling pregnant women in prison; establishing a maximum

geographical distance between prisoners and their families; enhancing compassionate release for terminally ill and elderly prisoners; assisting those returning to society with obtaining government identification documents; and fixing the "time credit" system, meaning credits prisoners receive for good behavior and/or time served.

The bill also reauthorizes the Second Chance Act to provide important resources for those re-entering society after their release from prison, the bishop noted.

It also does not exclude religious groups from being among the organizations that can provide recidivism-reducing programs for all federal prisoners.

The First Step Act has been criticized by its opponents for, among other things, failing to address sentencing reforms to reduce the number of people being sent to prison in the first place and only applying to the federal prison system. About 87 percent of all prisoners are held in state facilities.