

Drug Policy Alliance

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New York State Assembly Votes on Reforming Rockefeller Drug Laws. Drug Policy Alliance Holds Press Conference with Family Members, Legislators and Others

Advocates, Family Members Join the NY State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus to Demand Meaningful Reform to New York's Draconian Drug Laws

Legislators Sponsor Screening of New Documentary Film; Multi-Platinum Artist Jim Jones Releases New Single Calling for Rockefeller Drug Law Reform

Albany—Today, the New York State Assembly voted on legislation to further reform New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws, widely considered to be the nation's harshest. Advocates and family members affected by these draconian laws joined legislators at the 10 a.m. press conference to demand meaningful reforms. Following the press conference, there was a special screening of the new documentary about the Rockefeller Drug Laws, called *Lockdown, USA*. The screening was sponsored by Assemblyman Jeffrion L. Aubry, NY State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus, Senator Eric Schneiderman, Senator Jose Serrano, and the Drug Policy Alliance.

Assembly Bill 6663, introduced by Assemblyman Jeffrion Aubrey (Chair, Assembly Standing Committee on Correction), will expand drug treatment for people convicted of nonviolent drug offenses, and continue sentencing reform by allowing certain people serving time for "B" felonies to apply for resentencing—a key piece missing in changes to the law made in 2004 and 2005. The bill will also increase judicial discretion and allow for some people convicted of first and second-time drug offenses to receive treatment and probation instead of prison.

"The last small reform to the Rockefeller Drug Laws was clearly not enough. My son Ashley is a prime example of this, because he is serving a 7 to 21 year sentence for a first time, nonviolent offense," said Cheri O'Donoghue. "Senator Bruno, Speaker Silver, and Governor Spitzer have all promised real reform. The Assembly is acting—where is the Senate and the Governor? These inhumane, racist laws have been around for nearly 34 years, and enough is enough."

New York's Drug Law Reform Act of 2004 (DLRA) lowered some drug sentences but it fell far short of allowing most people serving under the more punitive sentences to apply for shorter terms, and did not increase the power of judges to place addicts into treatment programs. While advocates and family members are encouraged by the modest reforms, they are clear that the recent reforms have no impact on the majority of people behind bars. Most people behind bars on Rockefeller charges are charged with nonviolent lower-level or class-B felonies.

Gabriel Sayegh, director of the state Organizing and Policy Project of the Drug Policy Alliance said, "In order to accomplish real Rockefeller reform; the NYS Legislature must vote to restore judicial discretion; increase funding for community-based drug treatment and harm reduction programs which are proven to be more effective at reducing drug abuse than incarceration; reduce sentences and drop low level street sales out of the "B" felony category; end the use of mandatory minimums; and allow those serving long "B" felony sentences to apply for re-sentencing. Otherwise, it's more smoke and mirrors."

Advocates and legislators marked the day by hosting a special screening of *Lockdown, USA*, a new documentary which follows the unlikely coalition working to change the Rockefeller Drug Laws: outraged mothers and community members, formerly incarcerated people, hip-hop community leaders, and many more. The documentary, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in May 2006 and has screened at film festivals around the world, captures the series of events that forced the political establishment to reconcile with the burgeoning movement to repeal the draconian, racist Rockefeller Drug Laws. In addition, hip-hop megastar and multi-platinum artist Jim Jones recently recorded a new single about the Rockefeller Drug Laws, which is set for release with the film in early June 2007.

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