

FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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MICHAEL B. SHEEDY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



April 8, 2021

The Honorable Kelli Stargel
Florida Senate
420 Senate Office Building
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

RE: Opposition to HB 1 (Public Disorder)

Dear Chair Stargel:

The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops certainly does not condone violence. However, we oppose HB 1, as it is unnecessary and entails foreseeable unintended consequences. Our concerns are the following:

HB 1 is unnecessary

The crimes committed in recent riots in Washington and across the country prompt outrage and deep concern. As we reflect on these events, it is necessary to recall that assault, battery, burglary, theft, and stealing are already crimes, and perpetrators are being held accountable for these actions. It seems unnecessary to create new and stiffer penalties for crimes if they occur during a riot, as long as the applicable laws are enforced.

Reflects a retributive approach to justice

The Conference supports increasing gain time, as it incentivizes rehabilitation. The longer sentences in HB 1 work against gain time reform efforts to reduce the sentence lengths for individuals who demonstrate good behavior. Rigid formulations of mandatory minimum sentencing are one-size-fits-all solutions which are too often inappropriate, yet HB 1 creates a new mandatory minimum sentence.

Violates principle of subsidiarity

The provision that allows the governor to amend or override a local governing body's law enforcement budget prompts concern. A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions. Crime is largely a local issue; to the extent possible, local responses should be developed and respected.

Unintended consequences for churches, faith-based and other organizations

The terms "prohibited assemblies" and "riots" in HB 1 are undefined, as are "injury" and "force." Activities that we and many Floridians support, such as praying in front of an abortion facility, pro-life marches, and prayer vigils could be construed as prompting prosecution if this bill is enacted. This is a serious concern.

Alternative responses are available

There are other approaches to the civil unrest we have witnessed of late, including collecting data on use-of-force, de-escalation training, working to end racial profiling, doing away with chokeholds, using body cameras, greater accountability and means of redress regarding those

who exercise public authority, as well as a commission to study the root causes of riots and make additional recommendations. We support proposals such as SB 1818 (Burgess) and SB 1970 (Pizzo) as alternatives to HB 1.

Exacerbates existing ills

In its present form, HB 1 will further exacerbate the already-disproportionate impact of incarceration among the poor and communities of color while increasing costs of incarceration.

We must oppose HB 1, but are thankful for the time Senator Burgess extended to us to discuss our concerns. We remain available to continue the dialogue at your request.

Sincerely,



Michael B. Sheedy

cc: The Honorable Danny Burgess
Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee
Most Rev. Gregory L. Parkes, Bishop of St. Petersburg
Most Rev. William A. Wack, Bishop of Pensacola-Tallahassee & Prison Ministry Moderator