



New York State Council Of Churches

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2025-2026 Legislative Memorandum

MEMO IN SUPPORT OF 13TH FORWARD BILL PACKAGE:

No Slavery in New York Act, S.7282 (Myrie) / A.7873 (Meeks);

Prison Wage Act, S.439B (Myrie) / A. 3596B (Gibbs); and

S.1692 (Ramos) / A.2592 (People-Stokes) (in relation to commissary prices)

The New York State Council of Churches strongly supports the “13th Forward” package of three bills, which seeks to end forced labor in the New York prison system, increase the wage for workers who are incarcerated, and establish limits on mark-ups for commissary items.

The NYS Council of Churches includes nine Protestant denominations with 7500 congregations across the state. As people of faith, we are committed to shaping a criminal justice system rooted in repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. We reject mere revenge and constant punishment and degradation. We also seek to address the root causes of crime, including poverty and wealth inequality. Our goals are:

- 1) to keep people from going to prison in the first place.
- 2) to see that incarcerated persons receive the best pastoral and vocational assistance possible to restore themselves and get out of prison and
- 3) once they are out of prison to stay out and find support in their families and communities.

The 13th Amendment to the US Constitution ended chattel slavery, but with an insidious exception for those convicted of crimes. This exception and the lack of protection in our state law has allowed New York to build a massive penal industrial complex, so dependent on human exploitation and degradation that many liken it to modern-day slavery.

Today incarcerated people make everything from furniture for SUNY and New York City schools, to eyeglasses, trash cans, and government office furniture for pennies an hour. In fact, it is possible that the office chair you are sitting on today was made with prison labor. In addition, the many jobs that keep the prison system running could not be done without the work of incarcerated people. Food services, general cleaning, and library staffing in addition to extremely dangerous jobs like asbestos and lead paint removal are done by incarcerated workers. Moreover, in the spring 2020, as COVID-19 ravaged New York, businesses were placed under lockdown, and necessities like disinfecting wipes and hand sanitizer were scarce, incarcerated people risked their lives to create and bottle hand sanitizer that they themselves were prohibited from using.

Yet, unlike workers who manufacture goods and perform services on the outside, incarcerated people are forced to work, often in unsafe conditions, at jobs that do not provide the skills or experience that lead to success upon release. New York law requires all “able-bodied” persons to work, and punishment for refusing is often harsh. Currently and formerly incarcerated people report threats of physical abuse, solitary confinement, loss of family visitation privileges, revocation of parole, and extended sentences due to loss of good time credits.

To add insult to injury, New York pays its incarcerated workers at rates far below the national average. Workers earn from 10 to 65 cents an hour, with the vast majority earning less than a 33-cent wage. **Wages for New York's incarcerated workers have not increased in 30 years!** Moreover, the current system of prison profiteering requires prisoners to pay for essential items such as food, clothing, toiletries, and phone calls. These meager wages mean that most incarcerated people must work hours just to afford a single bar of soap, a toothbrush, or a nutritional food item from the commissary.

In addition, while wages have been stagnant since 1993, the costs of goods in commissary have seen steep increases, in some instances over 300 percent. This disparity takes a tremendous toll on the families and communities of incarcerated individuals. One in three families is driven into debt supporting a loved one who is incarcerated.

To address these harms, we support passage of:

- **No Slavery in New York Act, S.7282 (Myrie) / A.7873 (Meeks)**

The No Slavery in NY Act would amend the New York Civil Rights Law to make clear that all forms of slavery, forced labor, and involuntary servitude are prohibited in the state, and amend the Correction Law to expressly prohibit the use of force, threats of force, and any other threats of punishment as means to compel the labor of incarcerated people.

Since 2018, eight states – Colorado, Nebraska, Utah, Alabama, Oregon, Tennessee, Vermont and Nevada – have voted to amend their state laws to make the use of slavery and forced labor in prisons illegal. It is far past time that New York established an unqualified, formal prohibition on slavery in state law.

- **The Prison Wage Act, S.439B (Myrie) / A.3596B (Gibbs)**

The Prison Wage Act would provide all incarcerated workers with an hourly wage rate of one half the state minimum wage. Implementing this humane and commonsense change would allow individuals to afford basic necessities, alleviate financial burdens on—and even support—families of incarcerated loved ones, and lay the foundations for successful reentry.

- **Cap on Commissary Prices, S.1692 (Ramos) / A.2592 (People-Stokes)**

S1692/ A2592 would place a cap on commissary prices, allowing only a 3% increase over cost for items, and requiring other cost cutting measures to keep commissary prices from offsetting any wage increases for workers.

New York must do better. Our prison system must be free from the vestiges of slavery. Ending forced labor, creating work programs that provide real pathways to employment, and providing incarcerated individuals with fair wages (that can't be offset by increasing commissary prices) is critical for recognizing the basic humanity and dignity all incarcerated New Yorkers deserve. Together, these bills will strengthen individuals, their families and their communities while making New York safer and more humane.

The NYS Council of Churches strongly supports the 13th Forward package of bills and urges the legislature to pass these important reforms immediately.