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NEWS RELEASE

February 22, 2012

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Growing Prison Population Is Costly to Both Communities and Taxpayers New Report Highlights the Impact of Prison Overcrowding and Provides Recommendations

Even though its crime rate is stable and its population is barely growing, West Virginia's prison population continues to expand beyond the capacity of existing prisons and jails. Caught up in this crisis is the state's African American community whose members are at least four times more likely to be incarcerated than white West Virginians. The cost of housing these inmates has resulted in West Virginia having the second highest growth in prison spending in the nation between 1990 and 2010. This is just a few of the findings of a new report titled **"Stemming the Tide: The Racial and Economic Impacts of West Virginia's Prison System"**, co-released today by the Partnership for African American Churches, the American Friends Service Committee, and the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy.

"The last few decades in America and West Virginia have been characterized by mass incarceration. This has had enormous effects on state budgets, on individual and family lives, and on many vulnerable communities which are just not sustainable. We hope this study sheds light not only on how we got here but on how we can move forward," said Rick Wilson, Area Director of the West Virginia Economic Justice Program with the American Friends Service Committee.

Legislation to address this problem is currently under consideration by the state Senate. SB 342 would require the Department of Corrections to expand its drug treatment program with the aim of keeping nonviolent offenders from filling up the state's prisons and helping them to reenter society. It would also provide for more assistance for individuals exiting the prison system.

"With a prison population growing 100 times faster than the state's total population, West Virginia must find ways to slow this growth. Less expensive alternatives like work release centers, drug and mental health courts, and halfway back centers could be used for the rehabilitation of low-risk offenders. This would then leave prison beds free for those too dangerous to release into the community," explained Elizabeth Paulhus, policy analyst with the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy.

"The issue of prison overcrowding can be solved in the state of West Virginia. However, it is going to require out of the box thinking by everyone associated with the current system," continued Reverend James Patterson, Executive Director of the Partnership of African American Churches.

The full report is available at www.wvpolicy.org.