FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

14 Individuals Represented By University of Minnesota Law School Clemency Project Granted Commutations By President Trump

The University of Minnesota Law School is delighted to announce that 14 clients of the School’s Clemency Project, directed by Professor JaneAnne Murray, were among the list of commutation grants announced by the White House yesterday. All were represented pro bono and their clemency petitions were filed with the Office of the U.S. Pardon Attorney.

The grantees were all low-level participants in non-violent drug distribution cases, who received extremely long sentences that would be significantly lower today as a result of changes in the First Step Act and in the relevant federal sentencing guidelines. They all have exemplary records in prison and excellent release plans. Most are female clients Murray visited at Waseca FCI (Minnesota) and Carswell FPC (Texas) with her students. Since the commencement of this project at the school, more than 50 students have worked with Murray on state and federal clemency cases.

Murray stated: “All of these clients were serving excessive sentences that devastated their lives and the lives of their families. President Trump’s clemency grants reinforce that the cause of criminal justice reform is a bipartisan issue. We are filled with joy that these clients are reuniting with their loved ones. We will continue to represent similarly-situated prisoners and seek to redress the systemic inequities driving their disproportionate sentences.”

Bree Crye, 3L, adds: “It has been an incredible journey working with Professor Murray and getting to know the women in Waseca. The feeling I have today is not something I could have learned from a law textbook. The Clemency Project has offered me the unique opportunity to right an actual wrong. Today is a good day, and I hope to use this experience moving forward to inspire wider reform, continuing to shed light on the failures of our criminal justice system.”

Two of the Law School’s cases were presented to the White House as part of the 24 cases submitted by the NACDL’s Trial Penalty Clemency Project (which Murray directs (https://www.nacdl.org/Landing/trialpenaltyclemency). Of these 24 cases, President Trump granted fourteen cases (including the cases of Derrick Smith and Blanca Virgen).
The grants received by the Clemency Project’s clients today (and the students who worked on the cases) are as follows (with descriptions from the White House Press Release, supplemented by Professor Murray):

**Kristina Bohnenkamp** (Bree Crye, 3L) has served 10.5 years of a 24-year sentenced imposed for a non-violent drug offense. Today, as a result of changes in the First Step Act as well as the relevant sentencing guidelines, her sentence would be considerably lower. She has been an exemplary inmate, with an excellent record of programming and UNICOR work, and she is authorized to work outside the prison perimeter. Her warden in fact recommended her for home confinement under the CARES Act. She has a strong release plan with her sister and brother-in-law and several viable employment possibilities.

**Ann Butler** (Raasha Sulieman ’19) has served 10.5 years of an almost 20-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Today as a result of changes in the First Step Act, her sentence would be considerably lower. She has an exemplary prison record, with extensive programming and work, garnering outstanding evaluations. She is devoted to her faith. Balancing parenting five children and two minimum-wage jobs when she was arrested, her work ethic will serve her well upon release. She has an excellent release plan with her sister, and several viable employment prospects.

**April Coots** (Torie Watkins ’19; Lauren Clatch ’20) has served more than 10 years of her 20-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Today, as a result of various changes in the relevant sentencing guidelines, her sentence would be significantly lower. While incarcerated, she has been an exemplary inmate, obtaining an HVAC license and completing the PAWS apprenticeship program. Pre-trial for 18 months, Ms. Coots had started a business, completed her GED and had taken two semesters of community college classes. She has a supportive family and church community that will help her transition and create a stable network for her post-incarceration.

**Cassandra Ann Kasowski** (Bree Crye, 3L) has served more than seven years of a 17-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Today, as a result of changes in the First Step Act, her sentence would be less than the time she has already served. She has been an exemplary inmate and has worked extensively, including in the PAWS program and in UNICOR. She also visited high schools through the CHOICES program. Her warden recommended her for home confinement under the CARES Act. She has an excellent release plan with her son, who is a manager in a chain of restaurants and can give his mother a job as soon as she is released.

**MaryAnne Locke** (Stacy Kalpathy ’17) has served almost 11 years of a 19.5-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Today, as a result of changes in the relevant sentencing guidelines, her sentence would be considerably lower. Despite the trauma of entering prison 6 weeks after having a Caesarean section, her prison record was exemplary, with extensive programming and work. She was authorized to work outside the perimeter of the prison, and in fact was granted home confinement under the CARES Act last summer. She lives with her father, is building a great relationship with her children, and works fulltime at a major retail store.
**Tena Logan** (Melanie Johnson ’19) has served eight years of a 14-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Today, as a result of changes in the relevant sentencing guidelines, her sentence would be significantly lower. She had an exemplary prison record with extensive work and programming, and assumed several leadership positions. She was authorized to work outside the perimeter of the prison, and in fact was granted home confinement under the CARES Act last summer. She lives with her husband and works fulltime at a major retail store.

**Sydney Navarro** (Katie Scott ’20) has served almost eight years of a 27-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Her sentence would be considerably lower today as a result of changes in the First Step Act. She has an exemplary prison record. She obtained her GED and programmed and work extensively, garnering excellent work evaluations. She was chosen to speak to at-risk youth in the community through the SHARE program. She has an excellent release plan with her daughter, and has strong family support with several viable employment prospects.

**Lerna Lea Paulson** (Haley-Rose Severson, 3L) has served 6.5 years of a 17-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Today, as a result of changes in the First Step Act, her sentence would be less than the time she has already served. She has been an exemplary inmate, working full-time in UNICOR, and also working as a mental health counselor. She has been an inmate companion as well as a suicide watch companion. She is authorized to work outside the prison perimeter. Her warden in fact recommended her for home confinement under the CARES Act. She has an excellent release plan with her mother, and strong family support, and excellent employment prospects.

**Tara Perry** (Sarah Trautman ’20; Thomas Huling ’20) has served 6.5 years of a 16-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. As a result of changes in the interpretation of the sentencing guidelines, her sentence today would be significantly lower. She has had an exemplary prison record, including obtaining her nursing certification and “singing like an angel” at prison religious services. She has an excellent release plan with her mother and a plan for immediate employment.

**Jodi Lynn Richter** (Hannah Shacherl, 3L) has served 10 years of a 15-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Today, as a result of changes in the First Step Act, her sentence would be halved. She has an exemplary prison record, becoming a trainer and mentor in the PAWS program, tutoring other inmates in their GED studies, and learning to operate a range of heavy machinery. She has an excellent release plan with her parents who have remained supportive and has several employment opportunities lined up.

**Mary Roberts** (Marc Strom ’20) has served 10 years of a 19-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. Today, as a result of changes in the First Step Act, her sentence would be halved. She has had an exemplary prison record, and a strong programming and work history, including in the PAWS program, UNICOR and food service, and she is authorized to work outside the prison perimeter. Her warden recommended her for CARES Act transfer. She has an excellent release plan with her daughter, with strong family support and several viable employment prospects.
Derrick Smith (Stacy Kalpathy ’17) has served over 19 years of a 28-year sentence. Mr. Smith gave drugs to a party companion. The young woman tragically over-dosed. Smith brought her to the hospital and prayed by her bedside, but medics were not able to save her. He was charged with distributing cocaine causing death, rejecting a pre-trial offer that would have capped his sentencing exposure at 20 years. Mr. Smith is deeply remorseful for his role in this tragic death. Mr. Smith grew up in a difficult environment with little family support but has a stellar record while incarcerated. Even aside from the trial penalty, Mr. Smith’s sentence would likely be significantly lower today under recent Supreme Court jurisprudence. This case was separately one of the cases in the NACDL Trial Penalty Clemency Project.

Blanca Virgen (Tenzin Pelkyi ’16; Bree Crye, 3L and local Texas counsel Brittany Barnett), a mother of four imprisoned hundreds of miles from her family, has served 12 years of a 30-year sentence for drug charges. She exercised her constitutional right and went to trial rather than accepting the government’s plea offer of 10 years. Ms. Virgen is a model prisoner, having received countless achievement awards from her programming. Ms. Virgen wishes to go home and care for her children, two of whom recently lost their primary caregiver. This case was separately one of the cases in the NACDL Trial Penalty Clemency Project.

Caroline Yeats (Melanie Griffith, 3L; Bree Crye, 3L), a first-time offender, has served almost seven years of a 20-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense, that would be significantly lower today as a result of changes in the relevant sentencing guidelines. She has been an exemplary inmate, becoming a trainer of service dogs in the PAWS program, a mentor to other inmates, and a committed member of her faith community. She has an excellent release plan with her husband of 30 years who suffers from multiple sclerosis.

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The University of Minnesota Law School’s Clemency Project advocates for inmates serving disproportionately long prison sentences. Inaugurated in 2014 in response to President Obama’s clemency initiative for non-violent and low-level federal inmates, the project’s clemency advocacy work is at the heart of an innovative and integrated program aimed at connecting law students in a hands-on way to the human realities of mass incarceration.