FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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RESOLUTION REQUESTING PRESIDENT OBAMA TO COMMUTE LIFE SENTENCE OF JESSE WEBSTER

Chicago, IL – January 14, 2014 - In his letter from a Birmingham, Alabama prison the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is quoted as having said, “In justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” In the case of Jesse Webster a first time offender who has been sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole for a non-violent offense the unjust punishment for his crime is a threat to the justice of everyone everywhere.

Alderman Brookins plans to cash in one of his “chits” in asking the President to commute the sentence of Jesse Webster. “I have built up political capital and there can be no better way to spend it than by using it to resolve an injustice.” Brookins plans to introduce a resolution before the full City Council Wednesday urging the President to commute the life sentence Jesse Webster to the 18 years he has already served.

Webster was sentenced to life after his involvement in the 1995 cocaine deal that never happened. Webster had no criminal history, and was sentenced by the judge who admitted that the sentence was too high but stated that his hands were tied by a mandatory minimum. Webster was sentence to life after he refused a plea deal which would have required him to become an informant. He refused the deal out of safety concerns for his family.

Alderman Brookins plans to hold a press conference outside city council chambers on Wednesday, January 15, 2014 at 9:00 am to talk about the resolution.

-END-
RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, Jesse Webster grew up in Chicago, part of an impoverished family of seven; and

WHEREAS, when Mr. Webster was 16 years old, he dropped out of the 9th grade to take a job in a car wash in order to help his step-father support the family; and

WHEREAS, a client of the car wash – a drug dealer – offered the youngster a job as his driver, and Mr. Webster accepted and eventually became a drug dealer on his own; and

WHEREAS, in 1995 Mr. Webster learned that law enforcement authorities were looking for him, and he turned himself in for questioning; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Webster was taken into custody, charged with three counts of drug conspiracy and attempting to possess illegal drugs for distribution, as well as two counts of filing false income tax returns; and

WHEREAS, the drug charges stemmed from a deal that was not consummated, a deal that was negotiated with a federal informant; and

WHEREAS, rather than risk death by testifying against his associates, Mr. Webster took his case to trial and was found guilty on the tax charges and on two of the drug trafficking charges; and

WHEREAS, having no prior criminal record, Mr. Webster, who was then 28 years of age, was sentenced by Judge James B. Zagel to the mandatory “minimum” then applicable to his drug-related offenses: life imprisonment without the possibility of parole; and

WHEREAS, at the sentencing, Judge Zagel stated that he considered the sentence excessive, but that he had no legal alternative to the life sentence; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Webster is one of many first-time offenders sentenced to life without possibility of parole for a nonviolent offense; and

WHEREAS, since the date of Mr. Webster’s sentencing, the penalty for crimes similar to his has been greatly reduced, but that reduction is not retroactive to cases such as Mr. Webster’s; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Webster has spent 18 years in prison for a first-time conviction of a non-violent crime, and acknowledges his culpability for his offenses. While incarcerated, he completed his GED and works as a tutor to other inmates; and
WHEREAS, in light of the subsequent changes in sentencing guidelines applicable to offenses similar to his, Mr. Webster has petitioned President Barack Obama to commute the remainder of his sentence; and

WHEREAS, Judge Zagel and both of Mr. Webster’s prosecutors have filed written statements in support of Mr. Webster’s petition for commutation of his sentence; and

WHEREAS, the now-abandoned sentence of life without possibility of parole, especially for a first and nonviolent offense, is characterized by some as a “slow death” sentence, because it offers the person convicted no incentive to rehabilitate himself and no real hope, and is characterized; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED that we, the Mayor and members of the City Council of the City of Chicago, do hereby express the support of the City Council for the commutation of the remaining portion of the sentence of Mr. Jesse Webster; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we do hereby memorialize President Barack Obama to commute Mr. Webster’s sentence; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that suitable copies of this Resolution be presented to President Obama and to Mr. Webster, his family and his counsel.

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Alderman, 21st Ward