

March 24, 2006

My name is Laura McCargar, and **I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 5780, An Act Concerning Safe Schools.**

As the Executive Director of Youth Rights Media, a New Haven-based nonprofit organization that provides media training and youth empowerment opportunities for high-school aged youth, I care deeply about protecting and promoting the health and safety of our young people. As a front-line youth worker, I have also witnessed first hand the failure of current drug policies to deter drug sale and abuse.

In fact, the school zone law, as currently written, actually comprises the well-being of our youth and undermines the social and economic fabric of the New Haven community. According to maps developed by researchers at the Yale School of Epidemiology and Public Health, the only place in New Haven that does not fall within 1500 feet of a "school zone" is the Yale golf course. Consequently, any person selling drugs in the city of New Haven faces an enhanced sentencing penalty. As a result, individuals face different penalty under the law simply by virtue of where they happen to live.

The current law not only fuels Connecticut's grossly disproportionate incarceration rates of Connecticut's Black and Latino population, it also drains urban communities of resources that could instead be invested in workforce development, drug treatment and diversion, and increased educational opportunities for young people. According to the "Building Bridges" report submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly in 2003, \$86.8 million dollars is spent incarcerating residents of the city of New Haven, and the majority of those incarcerated have been convicted for non-violent drug offenses.¹

This economic reality lays bare an ugly truth about Connecticut's legal and judicial system. While the school zone laws may have been created with the intention of keeping youth safe, they are actually starving our youth and our schools of the resources that they need to become successful. I urge you to choose a brighter future for our young people by voting in support of HB 5780.

¹ *Building Bridges: From Conviction to Employment*, Council of State Governments, January 2003.