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**Testimony before the Judiciary Committee**

**Monday, March 13th, 2006**

**12:00 PM in Room 2E of the LOB**

Good afternoon, Chairpersons and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Frank Sykes the Legislative Analyst of the African-American Affairs Commission a non-partisan state agency committed to advocating on behalf of African-American in the state, through research, policy analysis and advocacy. The Commission testifies in support of two bills:

***HB 5782 – An act concerning the age of a child for purposes of jurisdiction in delinquency matters and proceedings***  
**and**

***House Bill (HB) 5651 – An act adopting the recommendations of the report of the Commission on Prison and Jail Overcrowding***

It is well documented that minority juveniles are more likely than other juveniles to become involved in the juvenile justice system. This overrepresentation is apparent at various levels, arrest, detention, prosecution, and may intensify as juveniles continue through the system. In Connecticut it is estimated that 65 percent of all incarcerated persons under the age of 18 are 17 years of age. Of that number a little over half roughly 57 percent are sentenced even though it has been determined that 30 percent need some sort of mental health treatment.<sup>1</sup> Studies highlight a multitude of reasons for disproportionate minority confinement; however the need for additional quality mental health services has often been identified as a major cause.

Many juvenile offenders are unfairly stigmatized for having been embroiled in the criminal justice system but we must understand that many of these youth never received the appropriate supervision or support in the first place. Opportunities to divert juvenile offenders to individuals and organizations, who can better focus on behavioral problems within a community setting, are often limited or are simply unavailable especially in urban communities. Extensive research supports that community-based programs offering a continuum of health services have proven successful and more cost-effective in correcting juvenile behavioral problems, while preserving public safety.<sup>2</sup> Over 60 percent of state police departments interviewed in a study indicated that alternatives for first time juvenile offenders would be used more often if they were available.<sup>3</sup> Connecticut is only of the three remaining states that still treat 16 and 17 year olds as adults for non-violent offenses. There is also international consensus that 18 is the appropriate cut off age of a child set by the universally recognized United Nations Convention for the Rights of a Child, signed by almost every nation in the world. Culturally

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<sup>1</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Juvenile Justice Bulletin, *Disproportionate Minority Confinement: Lessons Learned from Five States*

<sup>2</sup> Connecticut Center for Effective Practices of the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, Inc, *A Report on Behavioral Health Services for Children in Connecticut's Juvenile Justice System*

<sup>3</sup> Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparity in the Criminal Justice System, *2003-2004 Annual report and Recommendations*

competent programs and services if implemented effectively should serve as diversionary options for juveniles in lieu of incarceration in adult facilities. It's on these grounds the Commission supports ***Raised Bill 5782***

In reference to ***HB 5651*** in recent years the Commission presented testimony in support of a number of recommendations outlined in the Prison Overcrowding Report issued by the Prison and Jail Overcrowding Commission (PJOC) and initiatives discussed in the Building Bridges Report. Since then there have been serious efforts made by the legislature to address prison overcrowding in the state while maintaining public safety. Looking at the trends and statistics we see that the numbers show a decline in the overall prison population but we also notice that racial disparities in incarceration still exist. Based on discussions at the Building Bridges Forum the Commission holds that continued focus and resources need to be placed in post incarceration initiatives, primarily employment and other support services for ex-offenders. These services are essential and must be funded fully if there are to be any meaningful results. Accordingly the Commission supports all the funding measures outlined in the bill aimed at reducing prison overcrowding in the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.