

Testimony Provided by:
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HB 5782: Age of Jurisdiction

Good afternoon. My name is Robert Francis and I am the Acting Executive Director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance. I am here to speak in favor of HB 5782: An Act Concerning the Age of a Child for Purposes of Jurisdiction in Delinquency Matters and Proceedings.

There are several reasons why this bill should be passed but none more important than the fact that it is the right thing to do. Connecticut, unlike most states does not have a policy of how juveniles should be treated. Not having an overriding policy or philosophy of juvenile justice has made the juvenile justice system a stepchild of the adult corrections system and has facilitated a series of mistakes where the most prominent victim has been young people themselves. Connecticut has not had a juvenile justice plan with operating principles, goals and objectives and action strategies for over 30 years. Given the opportunity recently to develop a comprehensive juvenile justice plan, all we may get is a plan for the two departments to better communicate with one another. However much this may be needed, it does not go far enough to assure us that Connecticut will develop a system that serves all of our young people.

With no vision of what may be best for our young people we built a medium security prison designed for adults and we placed juveniles from the ages of 10 to 15, over 75% of whom had committed no serious offenses and were charged with a series of misdemeanors or needed to be incarcerated for their own safety.

We placed juvenile justice services in the Department of Children and Families and in the Judicial Department with no plan about how juvenile justice, mental health, substance abuse, child welfare services, detention, probation and parole would be integrated into one plan. Although much has been done recently to improve communications between the two departments, it is still not driven by an overall juvenile justice or youth development policy.

And finally, we along with only two other states – New York and North Carolina, treat every 16 year old who is arrested as an adult despite mountains of evidence that 16 year olds are not adults and that placing them in the adult system will only harm their chances for rehabilitation and do very little to protect public safety. We placed them in a system where behavioral health services are severely limited. For example, there is only one substance abuse treatment facility in Connecticut available to this population and yet over 70% of the young people admitted to Manson Youth Institute have drug related charges.

I have only heard one criticism of treating 16 and 17 year olds as juveniles and that is cost. But what is the cost to society of throwing away young people who are far from fully developed. The best brain research available says that 16 and 17 year olds are not

adults. Since their brains are not fully developed, they sometimes take risks and make mistakes that we as adults would not make. And secondly and most important, because their brains are not fully developed they are prime candidates for rehabilitation. That is if only we would make the leap and consider them as juveniles and provide them with job training and employment, mental health and substance abuse treatment services, special education, public education and social and emotional opportunities currently available to young people in the juvenile justice system. *we would give them a opportunity to thrive*

Thank you for your indulgence and please, for the sake of our children, pass HB 5782 and do all you can to make Connecticut a showplace for juvenile justice system reform.

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