

**Testimony provided by the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance**

**March 13, 2006**

**In favor of H.B. 5782**

**CONNECTICUT  
JUVENILE  
JUSTICE  
ALLIANCE**

The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance fully supports H.B. 5782: An Act Concerning the Age of a Child for Purposes of Jurisdiction in Delinquency Matters and Proceedings. Connecticut's current policy of treating all 16- and 17-year-olds as adults is inappropriate and fails our children. There are several reasons why this policy should be changed and H.B. 5782 enacted.

Connecticut's policy towards youthful offenders is one of the worst in the nation

Connecticut is one of only three states nationwide that *automatically* treats all children over the age of 15 as adults *no matter how minor the offense*. This practice sends all 16- and 17-year-olds, most of whom have committed non-violent offenses, to the adult court and places them in adult institutions without developmentally appropriate treatment.

Incarcerating youth in adult prisons presents a real safety risk

On July 24, David Burgos, age 17, committed suicide at the Manson Youth Institute (an adult Department of Corrections facility), where some youth are locked in their cells for as many as 21 ½ hours a day. Justice Department research shows that youth incarcerated with adults are 8 times more likely to commit suicide than their peers in juvenile facilities.

16- and 17-year-olds in Connecticut fall into a service gap because they are in the adults system. Because they have been labeled adults they are not eligible for the same kinds of services such as therapy, diversion or alternatives to incarceration that are available to young people in the juvenile justice system.

This practice doesn't promote public safety or reduce crime

There is no evidence that our state's practice of sending 16- and 17-year-olds to adult courts increases public safety. In fact, Donna Bishop, PhD, from Northeastern University has done research resulting in significant evidence showing that these policies have the *opposite* effect: trying youth in adult court increases crime! Youth who are tried and incarcerated in the adult criminal system are more likely to re-offend, and re-offend more seriously and frequently than young people tried and treated in the juvenile system for the same crimes.

Incarcerating youth as adults is not cost-effective

In a 1998 study, Professor Mark A. Cohen of Vanderbilt University highlighted the cost of failing to provide adequate supervision and treatment to troubled youth. The study found that every teen prevented from adopting a life of crime (including, future adult

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offenses) could save the country between \$1.7 million and \$2.3 million per youth. Throwing kids into the adult system might appear to be cheaper in the short term, but in the long term it is both expensive and costly.

Adolescents are not adults, with adult decision-making skills and understanding of consequences

Jeffrey Fagan, a professor at Columbia University, wrote in a recent issue of *The American Prospect*, "Science reliably shows that adolescents think and behave differently from adults, and that the deficits of teenagers in judgment and reasoning are the result of biological immaturity in brain development. The adolescent brain is immature in precisely the areas that regulate the behaviors that typify adolescents who break the law...the fluidity of development is probably greatest for teenagers at 16 and 17 years old, the age group most often targeted by laws promoting adult treatment."

Most importantly, changing this law so that adolescents are treated appropriately is simply the right thing to do. Not enacting this change sends a clear message that we do not believe in or support our young people.