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TESTIMONY OF CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC. IN SUPPORT OF H.B. 5782, AN ACT CONCERNING THE AGE OF A CHILD FOR PURPOSES OF JURISDICTION IN DELINQUENCY MATTERS AND PROCEEDINGS

Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. respectfully submits this written testimony to the Judiciary Committee in support of H.B. 5782, An Act Concerning the Age of a Child for Purposes of Jurisdiction in Delinquency Matters and Proceedings.

The Children at Risk unit of Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS) provides legal representation to low-income families who have children with disabilities, primarily to assist in obtaining access to special education and mental health services. Due to behaviors which are often manifested by their disabilities, many of our clients are either involved in or at risk of becoming involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

Currently, Connecticut is one of only 3 states that *automatically* treats all children over the age of 15 as adults, *no matter how minor the offense*. This practice results in all 16- and 17- year old youth, most of whom have committed non-violent offenses, to the adult court and places them in adult institutions without developmentally appropriate treatment and services.

Studies have shown that **as many as 70% of incarcerated youth suffer from some type of disability** (OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin - July 2000), whether a learning disability, emotional disturbance, mental health disorder, or combination of multiple disabilities. It is absolutely crucial that these young 16- and 17- year olds, many of whom have some type of disability, receive the treatment and rehabilitation that they need in order to become successful and productive adults.

The adult criminal justice system is simply not equipped to provide the appropriate services for these youth. The adult criminal justice system does not have the same type of services, such as counseling, Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST), diversion or alternatives to incarceration that are available to young people in the juvenile justice system. Punishing 16- and 17- year olds who commit non-violent offenses and who are often in need of treatment, by incarcerating them in an adult facility is harmful not only to the individual youth, but to our society and our communities. Youth who are 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.

We strongly urge the Judiciary Committee to Support H.B. 5782, An Act Concerning the Age of a Child for Purposes of Jurisdiction in Delinquency Matters and Proceedings.

Thank you for your time and consideration.