

My name is Nancy Gillis. I am a mother of three teenage boys, Sean eighteen years old, Chris and Matt both fourteen years old. We live in North Stonington Connecticut and have resided in Connecticut for most of our lives. I am a Registered Nurse in the Emergency Department at Lawrence and Memorial Hospital and my husband owns a small construction business in the state. I want to testify in favor of H.B. 5782. I want to share my son's and our experience to explain my support.

My eighteen-year-old son, who has ADHD and is Bi-Polar, was incarcerated for two months last year at the Manson Youth Facility, he was seventeen at the time. He was being held there to keep him safe, he had not been sentenced, nor convicted of a crime, he had been pending charges. He was ordered by the judge to be held while the bail commissioner's office searched for a drug rehabilitation and mental health program. It was to take a few days to a week; it took two months because there were no state beds.

Prior to his incarceration Sean's behavior was spiraling out of control. Particularly the last 2 months before going into Manson. He was constantly running away, using drugs and drinking. He also was not taking his needed medications. We would frantically search for him finding him on the streets and in backyard sheds bringing him home only for him to disappear again and again. We would call the police but because of his age, they could offer no assistance. We sought help from the Department of Social Services but yet again, because he was seventeen, there were no services that they could offer. We turned to the medical profession, dragging him to the Emergency room many times attempting to find another alternative but since he was not overtly suicidal or homicidal, we could not force emergent mental health attention. It was so frustrating, everywhere we turned our hands were tied because he was considered an adult in the eyes of the law. He had rights, rights that hurt him enormously. He had the right to run away, abuse himself, put himself in high risk situations, refuse all offered treatment, he had the right to live in an out of control manner. He exercised these rights regularly not knowing the repercussions because he didn't and couldn't even understand them.

My son was in serious trouble. The last and only place to turn was to the courts. The judge agreed that serious intervention was vital and ordered the bail commissioner's office to locate a bed for Sean. He was to be held until placement. According to the judge, this was to be expedited. He was placed in the Manson Youth Facility in Chester Connecticut in protective custody.

The treatment my son received at Manson Youth facility was shocking. It was punishment driven verses rehabilitative oriented, extremely distressing to me since these prisoners were mostly young boys, some sentenced, some not, some in serious trouble and others not. My son was thrown into a cell for 23 hours a day. He was left alone without any medication as he de-toxed off his street drugs of marijuana, alcohol, cigarettes, and pills. He was hysterical, and scared. He uncontrollably cried non-stop for three days while having severe anxiety and panic attacks. He was left this way to decompensate for days with severe emotional distress. He was threatening suicide constantly. I repeatedly called the mental health team (doctor and counselors) with concerns about his state of mind and ability to cope at that point. I was given the explanation that this was jail that he was adjusting and was safe. I begged to differ with them at the extremeness of his distress and questioned both the doctor and counselors about the prisons practice. I had no choice but to trust them, a severely disconcerting position to be in when your child is crying daily to you that he wants to die.

They finally put Sean on a sedative to calm some of the hysteria. However, to add insult to injury, one of the side effects happened to be an appetite stimulate, adding to his plight of constant hunger. The provided food was just enough to survive, he even resorted to eating scraps of other inmates plates when able to. He lost ten pounds the first two weeks he was there.

I could go on with many other overwhelming and atrocious situations. He was beat-up, stripped searched, moved in and out of protective custody with nothing other than his worn and dirty prison clothes on his back. He went without soap and toothpaste for three days at one point. He had received no effective or essential mental health treatment and never received any of his prescribed medications. We were riddled with confusion, anger and were severely distraught with the type of treatment or lack thereof. We had to constantly advocate for our son for basic human needs. The lack of staff accountability was appalling.

As the days continued to go by and still no bed for him, I feared daily for my son's safety, physically as well as emotionally. The prison staff continued to assure us that he would be and was safe. He could not hurt himself, it was impossible. The mental health team was and would visit him regularly, according to Sean, this didn't happen. Upon my calls to the counselors I would get the responses "There really is nothing we can do for him Mrs. Gillis, I feel bad for him". These are professionals in the mental health field? Being in the medical profession, I am mortified by these answers. I seriously questioned their practice prior to this but at that point I lost any faith in this system I once had.

It was about three months later that I read about the seventeen year old, David who had committed suicide. He hung himself with a bed sheet in his cell at Manson Youth Facility, a technique that Sean had discussed with me during one of his meltdowns. Like Sean, he too was ADHD and Bipolar and was being held on no charges. The excuse "It's jail" I am sure offered no comfort to this poor boy's family and loved ones. Unfortunately, I saw first hand how this could possibly happen. A youth broken down to the point of self-destruction with nowhere to turn to escape his own pain, confusion and delirium. There exist no words or excuses to blame this away. How sad this is and heart wrenching that this unnecessarily happened. I am deeply remorseful and effected by this tragedy. I will never forget this young teen David. He and his family are in my prayers daily.

Today my son continues to struggle profoundly. He is currently in Corrigan Correctional Facility again waiting for admission, hopefully to the program Day top, along-term program to get clean and then face the consequences of his actions his sentencing. This time his addiction and mental health issues drove him to Crack cocaine and to depths that traumatized him and us even more. However, he is managing better at Corrigan the treatment is at least tolerable.

Just a quick note, the program he was in right after Manson, the one he suffered for two months offered him nothing more than another holding cell and training ground for more crime. Again, I can site many examples, but in the interest of time I will not at this point. There were many problems and these programs in my opinion have to be reviewed and revamped to effective.

What I have seen through this horrific experience is that incarcerating this population in this manner, accomplishes nothing but unreachable, angrier and meaner kids. They are then dumped back into society to fail again. The inability for parents, guardians and law enforcement to have any control over these youngsters, the ones that need the most guidance, hinder the process while adding additional burdens to our society no matter where you live in the state, it is creating and feeding a culture that filters out to all of us.

. I hope the experiences that I shared can shed some light on the current inadequate system that the state has. This is why I support and believe in this legislation that would return the 16-18 year olds back to the juvenile system. They are kids, and should be treated as such and given opportunities to change their lives. The control and decision making should be placed with the parents, guardians, law enforcement officials, and all others in position that can support and appropriately lead these kids to a productive, healthy, happy life. They need treatment, not punishment, not imprisonment. There has to be a better way and we need to find it for the sake of all our youth.