

Senator MacDonald, Representative Lawlor, and Members of the Judiciary Committee

My name is Susan Zimmerman and I am the policy specialist for FAVOR, a family advocacy organization for children's mental health. I am here today to urge adoption of **H. B. 5782 An Act Concerning the Age of a Child for Purposes of Jurisdiction in Delinquency Matters and Proceedings.**

As you know, Connecticut is one of only three states where 16- and 17-year-olds are incarcerated as adults regardless of their crime. While FAVOR understands that the law was passed originally in response to concerns regarding public safety, we do not believe the law has worked to that end. Studies in other states have shown that 16- and 17-year olds who serve time in adult prisons will recommit crimes at a higher rate than those who serve time in juvenile facilities.

I won't presume to have the data you seen from experts who have testified before you. I can bring you the anecdotal experiences of the families whose children have been incarcerated in adult prison. These families feel they have lost their child and watch helplessly as their son or daughter falls further into trouble with the law.

Often this young adult is being incarcerated following a referral to Families with Service Needs. The referral was made in the first place because of issues arising from mental illness or substance abuse. Yet at Manson, this young adult is locked up for 23 hours at a time and often doesn't have access to medication.

I have to repeat the questions from the testimony I read at the public hearing on February 21st. How can you explain that locking up a child in solitary confinement is a good idea? What outcomes were you expecting? How could you possibly think that this could change behavior for the better?

These questions become all the more poignant when we consider the developing brain of the 16- and 17-year old. I asked my own 17-year-old son the question that Dr. Abigail Baird posed in the study she presented at the February 21st hearing: Is swimming with sharks a good idea? My son, who is an honor student at Norwich Free Academy, had no hesitation in replying that swimming with sharks would be fine as long as there was no blood. It's not that he gave a bad answer. It's that his brain is still developing the ability to make the social distinctions that we adults take for granted.

The change in jurisdiction proposed by H. B. 5782 takes into account what researchers now know about brain development. It gives 16- and 17-year olds the opportunity to access rehabilitation services at a time when their developing brain can still benefit. If you as legislators are concerned about public safety, FAVOR submits this bill is the better answer.

There are others who will testify before me and after me regarding the opportunity cost of not changing this law. There are others who will explain why this law actually solves the problem of Families with Service Needs. My testimony today is a reminder that families are watching helplessly while they see real harm done to their children. FAVOR urges you to report favorably on H.B. 5782 in the name of the better outcomes for the 16- and 17-year olds of Connecticut.