

Testimony provided by Jesse Work
March 20, 2006
In support of H.B. 5700

Good afternoon. My name is Jesse Work. I am here to support H.B. 5700, calling for race-neutral criteria for detaining youth. I know first hand how differently a youth can be treated based on one thing, his/her skin color. This bill is important for me because I need to know that what happened to my son did not happen because of his race.

My son was 17-years-old when he committed his first and only crime. I know that my son made a mistake and there are consequences. However, the way he was treated and how his case was handled was different than how he would have been treated if he were white. I'm aware that if my son were a different color, his outcome would have been different; there would have been more options.

From my experience of living in Waterbury, particularly in my son's case, there are times when police officers will come into your home without a search warrant. Then there are times when a search warrant will be issued. What makes the difference is the color of your skin. The choices are made based on your race and not your crime.

Unfortunately, even my son's lawyer was aware of this deciding factor. There was no push for a trial, only a push for a plea. We were told that we did not want to "rattle any fences" because this was the "good old boy system." The only option my son had was to take the plea or go to prison for 40 years. We had to settle for 15 years. Why should my son have to "settle" based on his skin color?

At the time my son was sent to Manson Youth Institute, there was a young man who had committed a similar type of crime. Recently, he was released from Manson and was permitted to go back home with his family. What is important to know, however, is that this young man was white. He was not found innocent or convicted of a crime that was any less serious. The only difference that existed between my son and this young man was their skin color.

I do not want to point fingers or place blame. I only want people to see that changes need to be made in the current system and this problem must be addressed now. Justice should be colorblind and the system should treat everyone the same regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, or income. It seems to me, that this bill will help insure that Connecticut has a justice system that is colorblind or at least the beginnings of a colorblind system. Thank you.