



NAMI Connecticut

Connecticut's Voice on Mental Illness

Testimony before the Judiciary Committee

April 4, 2007

Support for HB 6285

Good morning, Senator McDonald, Representative Walker, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Louise Pyers, and I am the Criminal Justice Program Director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness of CT. I am here today to urge you to pass HB 6285, An Act Concerning the Age of a Child with Respect to Juvenile Court Jurisdiction.

HB 6285 will raise the age of adulthood in Connecticut courts to 18 years old. Many of these youth have significant mental health and other needs that are not addressed by the adult system. They should be in a system that treats them, and helps them to become productive adults. Instead, these youth are placed directly into a gap within the services system making them ineligible for services in the juvenile system and inappropriate for services suitable for adults. The services available within the adult criminal are not equipped to address their developmental needs.

If young people with histories of trauma, neglect, abuse, and violence do not receive appropriate interventions, they are nearly 60% more likely to be arrested as juveniles, more likely to be arrested as adults, and more frequently commit violent offenses relative to others in the general population.¹

This legislation provides for specialized age-appropriate services, services for families, and mental health screening, assessment, and treatment. It also includes the introduction of a risk assessment tool for youth, and the development and implementation of a comprehensive system of community based services and residential services for juveniles. It provides for developmentally appropriate and rehabilitative responses to their delinquency through the juvenile justice system. The Juvenile Jurisdiction Planning and Implementation Committee has spent months of thoughtful planning with state and national experts to ensure that the juvenile justice system and community based system would be able to meet the needs of these adolescents, and this bill is consistent with its recommendations.

Far too many of kids who need mental health treatment, but fail to get it, land in the juvenile justice system – where an alarming 70% of youth have one or more psychiatric disorders. At least 20% of youth involved in the juvenile justice system have serious mental illnesses, including those that are suicidal, struggling with psychotic disorders, and other serious illnesses.²

We cannot continue to give up on our youth. They deserve a second chance at life. They are the future of our communities and state.

Thank you for considering this vital legislation

¹B.T. Kelley, T.P. Thornberry & C.A. Smith, *In the Wake of Childhood Maltreatment*, OJJDP JUV. JUST. BULL. (1997).

²National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice. *Blueprint for Change: A Comprehensive Model for the Identification and Treatment of Youth with Mental Health Needs in Contact with the Juvenile Justice System*. 2006.