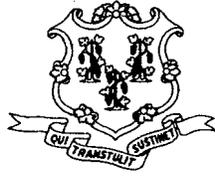


**State of Connecticut**  
**GENERAL ASSEMBLY**



**COMMISSION ON CHILDREN**

Judiciary Committee  
Public Hearing  
April 4, 2006  
Testimony Submitted by Elizabeth C. Brown  
Legislative Director, COC

Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and members of the Committee. My name is Elizabeth C. Brown and I appreciate the opportunity to testify on several bills before you that contain sweeping changes to the landscape of juvenile justice in Connecticut as well as other bills that promote youth policy based on positive youth development principles. Also, the Commission supports the establishment of a permanent committee to continue the work of the Interagency Task Force on Trafficking in Persons.

**Support: Committee Bill 6285, An Act Concerning the Age of a Child with Respect to Juvenile Court Jurisdiction**

The bill embeds in state statute the new policy direction to extend jurisdiction in delinquency matters and proceedings to children aged sixteen and seventeen. Connecticut is only one of three states to include this age group in the adult Court. It also codifies the recommendations of the Juvenile Justice Jurisdiction Implementation Committee chaired by Senator Harp and Representative Walker to implement the new age policy.

The Commission wholeheartedly supports this historic shift in state policy and had the honor of serving on the Juvenile Justice Jurisdiction Implementation Committee that developed a consensus report outlining the steps necessary to implement the policy embodied in the bill before you.

Connecticut is currently one of only 3 states that consider 16 years the age at which one reaches criminal adulthood. There is a growing consensus to serve 16- and 17-year olds in the juvenile rather than adult justice system. Neuroscience research says that these youth still possess a different capacity for judgment and mature reasoning than adults. In almost every other context, 16- and 17- year olds are considered minors, not adults in such matters related to voting, drinking, staying in school, and military service.

**Profile of Connecticut 16 and 17 year olds Incarcerated**

As of October 2006, 418 16- and 17- year olds were incarcerated

- 140 were identified as having special education needs-
- 93.4% in Mason Correction Institution were tested at 8<sup>th</sup> grade education level or below,
- 18.4% suffered from at least some impairment from mental illness, and 15.7% had substantial medical needs.
- Over half of juveniles have difficulties with school, concerning academic achievement as well as behavioral problems,
- 51% of juveniles in total had a history of psychological intervention while 68% percent of juveniles transferred to adult court had a history of psychological intervention and 73% of juveniles had psychological intervention recommended.
- Many youth offenders committed their crimes while under the influence of some substance.
- Over 80% of youth have prior involvement with the Department of Children and Families.

Given the research on youth development it is critical that 16 and 17 year olds have the same access to testing and services that youth less than 16 have to try and prevent further involvement with the criminal justice system. Juveniles receive court ordered mental health and substance abuse evaluations. Cases are usually resolved within 4 months, and the offender is most often put on probation during the time the case is pending. The focus of the Juvenile system is on rehabilitation and the best interest and treatment of the offender is a priority as well as, the safety of the community and the victim.

### **The Juvenile Justice System Improvement Plan**

The bill before you includes steps to improve the Juvenile Justice System and put in place standards and policies that promote prevention and early intervention.

The new policy direction for the Juvenile Justice System will include policies to better assess and develop services for youth to decrease pre-trial detention; decrease overrepresentation of youth of color incarcerated; increase health and mental health treatment; increase education interventions to address literacy and improve academic outcomes; increase community based services and move to a more coordinated system that holds all parties accountable. Core components include:

- Establish new regional youth courts
- Allow credit for time served as a juvenile if the case is transferred to adult court
- Develop and Implement an independent-validated risk assessment instrument on a state wide basis to better monitor and hold the system accountable;
- Develop and Implement a case classification process to establish classification program levels and case management standards for each level.
- Establish a state wide community based system of care that maximizes federal and state dollars, especially Medicaid.
- Requires the Court Support Services Division to develop constructive programs for prevention and early intervention and act as the lead agency for coordination among other state agencies and local communities.

- Requires adequate training for staff and providers
- Establish as state policy a youth be placed in the least restrictive environment possible in a manner consistent with public safety.
- Plan for adequate personnel including new judges and court support staff

A new **Juvenile Jurisdiction Policy and Operating Coordinating Council** is established to monitor the implementation of the central components of the plan. This oversight body will have broad representation and provide a state level entity to keep all stakeholders talking and working together.

In summation, this policy represents the best national research and establishes a policy that calls for more coordination, accountability, and a major shift of prevention and early intervention. More importantly it is built on solid research and understanding of youth social, emotional, cognitive and physical development and hopefully holds the promise of a brighter future for our youth in Connecticut.

**Support: Committee Bill 5676, An Act Concerning Children of Families with Service Needs**

The bill before you seeks to establish Family Support Centers to serve Families with Service Needs and amends legislation passed in 2005 that prohibits the Courts from sending youth to detention centers for status offenses by allowing commitment under certain limited circumstances. This new policy direction seeks to provide services on the local level to help youth address problems and help strengthen ties to family, school and community.

This bill is the culmination of the work of the Family With Service Needs Task Force that studied the current system and determined that the Courts did not have enough viable local services available to intervene in a way that would make a difference in the life of a youth. The Commission concurs with these findings and urges investment in policies that are less costly and more importantly, far less damaging to the healthy development of youth. Prevention Works!

The Commission recommends that the Superior Court report on an annual basis to the Legislature on the effectiveness of the Family Support Centers on performance measures related to positive youth development attributes including school attendance, academic achievement, and other indicators related to changing behavior associated with Family With Service Needs.

**Support: Committee Bill 902- An Act Concerning Youth Who Run Away-** the bill adds a youth's guardian or custodian to the appropriate list of adults who should be included in decisions regarding a youth deemed a Youth in Crisis. This bill seeks to ensure that youth have access to adults who can support and care for them during difficult times. This broadens the options the courts have to address the needs of this group of adolescents.

**Support: RB 1269, An Act Concerning the Quality of Legal Representation of Children and Youth in Juvenile Matters-** The bill appropriates funds to establish a multidisciplinary agency model of legal representation for children and youth in Juvenile Matters. The Commission supports this initiative to address the barriers to adequate legal representation.

**Support: S.B. No. 398, An Act Establishing a Trafficking in Persons Council.**

Human trafficking is a critical issue that must continue to be investigated and dealt with. According to a 2004 report by the U.S. Department of State, between 600,000 and 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year, the majority of whom are women and children trafficked into sexual exploitation. 14,500 to 17,500 people are trafficked into the U.S. each year.

Connecticut's two interstate highways connecting New York City and Boston as well as an international airport and three marine ports make it an appealing location for traffickers. Despite the establishment of the Interagency Task Force on Trafficking in Persons, determining the extent of human trafficking and its impact on Connecticut residents continues to be an immense challenge.

In order to better combat the crisis of trafficking, the Task Force made several recommendations including establishing a Trafficking in Persons Council to continue the collaboration of the existing task force. The council would provide a forum for updates and progress reports as the anti-trafficking statute is enforced, develop mechanisms to ensure that victims are provided adequate services and representation of legal matters, and identify the needs and services of the children of trafficking victims.

We fully support the establishment of this council to aid in stopping trafficking in Connecticut. Trafficking affects the lives of thousands of people, including children, and we must do everything we can to help these victims. The council would identify criteria for providing services to victims and children of victims, work to protect and assist victims and their children, and prosecute traffickers, contributing to the national, state, and local goals of combating human trafficking.

Thank you for your consideration of these important matters.