Testimony in Support Of Senate Bill SB-902

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I am a resident of the State of Connecticut. I moved to Connecticut in 1997 shortly after the conclusion of a military career that required frequent family moves. I was looking forward to stability and the opportunity to establish roots. Had I been aware or understood the implications of Connecticut laws that give 16 and 17 year old children the right to reject parental authority and live wherever they choose, I would have avoided moving here.

I have always understood and lived up to my responsibilities as a father. My ability to do so is seriously undermined by Connecticut's 'Gray Area' legislation. This legislation foolishly provides destructive options to children who are suddenly able to turn what might otherwise be a typical teenage 'rebellious phase' into something far more damaging in terms of the child's health, safety, welfare, and capacity to mature and develop into a healthy and productive adult.

I have suffered the insult of having outsiders lure my child to 'better' circumstances. Drug abuse, association with prolific drug users, and involvement with other behaviors I find objectionable, were involved. It would have been easier and in keeping with the state's code of 'convenience' to turn my attention from these threats to my child and my child might, in fact, still be living under my roof had I not taken a strong stand against these destructive behaviors. I feel it is my duty to set appropriate standards. In 'progressive' Connecticut, those standards have been legislated 'out-of-date'. It seems like the unspoken legislative view is that teenage drinking, drug abuse, and casual sex have become an expected part of teen development. This is where I and other responsible parents experience a tortured disconnect with respect to the law. It is very difficult to respect the law when the law enables reckless teenage behavior, encourages family-breaking decisions by immature children, and undermines a parent's legitimate parenting authority.

Our elected officials seem dedicated to a holy grail of progressive rights that may be appropriate for grown adults but which are convincingly disruptive

for children (those under the age of 18...) who still have years of crucial development ahead of them. Extending adult decision-making status to a child is an incredibly misguided thing to do. Kids this age are experiencing the most turbulent developmental years of their lives. I believe that teenagers need to engage in independent thought and achieve increasing independence of action and privilege as they grow and mature. However, this is a transition that is best left to parents to manage.

If the roots of the Connecticut 'Gray Area' Legislation do not lie in a fundamental lack of understanding of what its like to be a teenager in Connecticut in the year 2007 or what its like to parent a teenager today, then perhaps the issue is 'money'. The original Gray Area Legislation, as well as subsequent legislation disingenuously set forth to correct the glaring deficiencies of the Gray Area Legislation, contain language that protects the state from liability, inhibits parental control, and leaves parents liable for the child's actions. Parents should, indeed, be responsible for the actions and behavior of their children. When the state imposes itself in this relationship, preventing the appropriate exercise of parental control, then the state should assume responsibility for the actions of the uncontrolled child.

It is obvious that our elected officials have crafted past legislation to remedy the Gray Area problem (ie., Youth in Crisis Statutes) with a careful eye on protecting the state's interests at the expense of the highly vulnerable child and the now hobbled parents. The state seems concerned about what happens if it obligates law enforcement agencies to return runaways to their homes and the child refuses to remain there (ie., continues to run away). Emancipating the child is problematic for the state. In this regard, the state seems cognizant of the fact that 16 and 17 year old teenagers are not typically ready to assume adult responsibility for their lives. Teenage emancipation is accordingly very rare. Dealing with repeat runaways implies the need for treatment and incarceration. These are responsibilities the state wishes to avoid and so the easy solution becomes endorsing the status quo, allowing the runaway to remain at risk, with developmental issues unresolved, while the parents suffer the emotional torture of standing helplessly by, unable to intervene for their child and all the while being held financially responsible for any liabilities the child incurs while outside of parental control. This is fundamentally unfair. It robs the child of the opportunity to complete a normal developmental experience in the safety of the parental home and it exposes the parents to unreasonable financial risk.

At the beginning of my personal experience with these issues, I worked at odds with the state to reestablish control over my runaway child. At every turn, officials were first and foremost concerned that my child's 'rights' not be perceived to be violated in any way. So strong was this devotion to my child's 'rights' that seemingly actionable factors, such as my child's admissions of drug and alcohol abuse, failed to impress anybody except me (the parent) who alone was left to face the ramifications of my child's drug use. Nor was the state concerned when notified that an adult member of the family my daughter was living with was being prosecuted for internet sex crimes involving video pornography featuring young (pre and teenaged) girls. This prosecution ended in a plea bargain. All that mattered where my daughter was concerned is that this is where she was choosing to live. I came to court prepared with a plan for residential drug treatment for my daughter. I was not able to implement this plan. As the presiding judge indicated, my child could have been forced into treatment if she was 18 (or over) or 15 (or younger). Incredibly, 16 and 17 year old children do not qualify for the sensible measures taken to assist any other troubled individual in the State of Connecticut.

SB-902 , paragraph 'C' ends with the following statement. '*A youth in crisis found to be in violation of any order under this section shall not be considered to be delinquent and shall not be punished by the court by incarceration in any state-operated detention facility or correctional facility*'. This language mirrors the language that undercuts the current YIC statute, rendering it useless in any practical sense. I encourage members of this committee to modify and approve this proposed legislation so that it empowers parents to appropriately control their children.