

Senator McDonald, Rep Lawlor, and Members of the Judiciary Committee

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the youth in Connecticut's court system. My name is Susan Zimmerman and I am the Policy Specialist at FAVOR, a statewide family advocacy organization for children's mental health. FAVOR works with youth and their families and with parent support organizations giving us firsthand experience with youth incarcerated in the adult system.

FAVOR supports

Committee Bill No. 6285 AN ACT CONCERNING THE AGE OF A CHILD WITH RESPECT TO THE JUVENILE COURT JURISDICTION to raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to age eighteen consistent with the recommendations of the Juvenile Jurisdiction Planning and Implementation Committee

Committee Bill No. 5676 AN ACT CONCERNING CHILDREN OF FAMILIES WITH SERVICE NEEDS to revise FSWN proceedings and to require establishing family support centers.

As the committee well knows, Connecticut is one of only three states where 16- and 17-year olds are incarcerated as adults regardless of the 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 and have a higher rate of recidivism than those who are being rehabilitated in juvenile facilities.

We believe the goal should be a balance between assuring public safety and the provision of rehabilitation and treatment services for youth. Often the only difference between a DCF youth in need of services and a youth serving time in prison with seasoned criminals is that one youth got caught and the other did not.

Few of these youth have committed serious crimes and often these young adults are 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. Incarceration often makes these problems worse because youth may be locked up for 23 hours at a time and may not have access to their treatment.

The current science on the developing brain of the 16- and 17-year old suggests that these youth are not yet capable of making adult decisions. To treat them in an adult facility then is not reasonable. The change in jurisdiction gives the 16- and 17-year olds the opportunity to access rehabilitation services at a time when their developing brain can still benefit. If we are concerned about public safety, then juvenile detention and rehabilitation is the better answer.

Serving this population will require more resources in the short term while assuring greater public safety over time. In the long term we can expect a resource savings as these youth are able to access employment and become fully participating community members. We can also reduce the commitment of resources by intervening earlier. FAVOR fully supports the recommendations of the Families with Service Needs Advisory Board contained in Committee Bill 5676. These recommendations would create a diversionary system at the front end by providing screening and assessment which we believe is the cost effective way to serve these youth and their families. And the bill would provide appropriate procedural safeguards for FWSN youth.

Further, the proposed Family Support Center model ensures that services to best serve the needs of FWSN families are available. The Family Support Center model will assure that youth and families have access to short-term respite and family mediation which has been shown to be an effective crisis intervention strategy. Other new services would include educational advocacy and pro-social activities. FAVOR requests that the year two funding for six centers in addition to the four urban areas is included. We look forward to blending these centers into the local systems of care.

FAVOR testified at the budget hearing in support of the Alternative Education Center for Girls (PACE) Center. This program was eliminated from the Governor's budget and we would ask that it be funded. We would also ask that the Truancy Pilot Program, also eliminated from the Governor's budget, be funded.

FAVOR believes that the jurisdiction change and the FSWN Advisory Board recommendations will better serve youth and families in Connecticut. We have heard too often the anecdotal experiences of the families who are watching their young adult spiral downward through the system falling further into trouble with the law. My testimony today is a reminder that families are watching helplessly while they see real harm done to their children serving time in prison and not having access to needed services. We can change this outcome.

We ask you to favorably report Committee Bills 6285 and 5676.