

Testimony of Maura Sheil-Hughes
Judiciary Committee
April 4, 2007
Support for HB 6285

My name is Maura Sheil-Hughes. I work with the Keep the Promise Coalition.

Keep the Promise is a statewide coalition of more than 40 organizations which was established in 1999 to advocate for the comprehensive community mental health system that the state promised to create when state hospitals were closed. Our efforts focus specifically on implementing the Blue Ribbon Commission's recommendations for addressing the crisis in Connecticut's mental health services. Despite measures to expand and improve community services and housing, the crisis continues.

I am here to express the Coalition's strong support for **HB 6285, "Raise the Age."**

Connecticut is one of only 3 states that try 16 and 17 year old youths as adults. Keep the Promise believes that adult criminal court is no place for teenagers, especially if they have a psychiatric disability. Most offenses committed are minor, nonviolent crimes like drug possession or disorderly conduct. While the offending teen should be held accountable for his/her crime it is imperative that it be done in an **age appropriate way**. Studies show that youth in the juvenile justice system are less likely to commit another crime than those who are tried in adult courts and incarcerated.

Throwing teens in an adult jail does not promote public safety or deter crimes. It puts them in a system that isn't trained to deal with adolescents and therefore cause more harm. Over time, substantial money will be saved by placing our youths in an appropriate juvenile justice system rather than adult incarceration.

We believe that:

- Connecticut's 16 and 17 year olds should not be automatically tried and incarcerated in the adult criminal justice system.
- The jurisdiction of the Juvenile Matters section of the Superior Court for delinquents Family With Service Needs should be raised to 18.
- We support balanced and restorative justice for children and youth involved in the justice system; i.e. personal accountability, competency development and community protection.

I urge you to please support this important bill.

Thank you.