



Jeanne Milstein
Child Advocate

STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

18-20 TRINITY STREET, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06106

Testimony of Jeanne Milstein, Child Advocate
Committee on Judiciary
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Good afternoon Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Jeanne Milstein and I am the Child Advocate for the State of Connecticut. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding Proposed Bill No. 6987, An Act Concerning the Rights of Inmates with Mental Illness.

I am here to talk about an often-forgotten population of inmates with significant mental health needs—the boys and girls placed at our state's adult correctional facilities. As of February 1, 2007, 672 boys age 18 and under were incarcerated at Manson Youth Institution and 22 girls under age 17 were incarcerated at York Correctional Institution. These children are in desperate need of access to quality mental health assessments and services that are developmentally appropriate, gender-specific, and trauma informed. I urge you to include in any legislation regarding mental health treatment and services for inmates in adult correctional facilities language to ensure that the services and staff providing such services are tailored to meet the needs of our adolescent prison population.

Sadly, there has been a steady increase in the number of boys and girls placed in adult facilities. We have been working closely with Commissioner Lantz and members of the senior management team at the Department of Correction on ensuring that children get desperately needed mental health services and appreciate their leadership and attention.

It should not be surprising that the adolescents at Manson and Youth are likely to have mental health needs. We know that the vast majority has experienced abuse, neglect, domestic violence and personal trauma. Research nationwide has documented the link between child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency.¹ A review completed by the Office of the Child Advocate of the 28 girls at York in November 2006 confirms these findings. My staff found that only one girl did not have a history of involvement with the Department of Children and Families. And every week my staff reviews the cases of children with histories of trauma, abuse, neglect and violence who have not received adequate assessments and services. For many of these children, their pathway is all-too familiar: foster care, residential placement, detention and then, finally, Manson and York.

¹ Cusick, G.R. and Courtney, M.E. (2007) Offending during late adolescence: how do youth aging out-of-care compare with their peers? Chapin Hall Center for Children, Issue Brief #111.

Incarceration in an adult jail setting marks another traumatic event in the lives of these adolescents. For at least one adolescent the impact was death. OCA's ongoing investigation into the suicide of David Burgos in 2005, a 17-year-old inmate at Manson, found that David was a young man with well-documented profound mental health needs and that Manson was not equipped to meet those needs.

Common sense and a large body of research tell us that children are different than adults. While adult inmates may share similar life experiences and problems as the adolescents at Manson and York, these issues manifest themselves differently across the life span. As a result, mental health services for adolescent inmates must be matched to their developmental stages and tailored to fit their particular needs and issues.

We also know adolescent girls have different needs than adolescent boys and respond differently to treatment. Emerging research on girls in adult prisons highlights the urgent need to ensure age appropriate and gender specific mental health assessment and programming.² Like the boys at Manson, the girls arrive at York with numerous unmet mental health needs. Their mental health needs are often exacerbated by incarceration. The girls at York face particular risks to their mental health due to practices that isolate them from one another and from the prison programs. The girls are housed separately in the maximum-security unit of the facility. They lack access to emotional and mental health support programs including substance abuse and counseling groups available to the adult women inmates. Additionally, several girls have arrived at York pregnant and given birth while incarcerated and one seventeen year old miscarried in her cell. There can be no doubt that developmentally appropriate and gender-specific mental health assessment and programming is critical at York.

The spirit of Bill No. 6987 must flow to our state's most vulnerable inmates. They too deserve individualized, clinically appropriate mental health services by qualified professionals. They also need thoughtful, well-planned transitions from prison to systems of care that will support their emotional well-being and prospects for successful adulthood. Staff at Manson and York need training on adolescent development, the impact of trauma, and the importance of gender specific programming and services.

Please ensure that Bill No. ⁶⁹⁸⁷~~5821~~ integrates the unique needs of incarcerated adolescent boys and girls. Doing so can have an immediate and lasting effect on a child's health and well being.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

² Gaarder, E. and Belknap, J. (2004) Little women: girls in prison. Women and Criminal Justice, 15(2), 51-80.