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**Judiciary Committee Public Hearing**

**Wednesday, April 4, 2007**

**Senate Bill No. 902, An Act Concerning Youth Who Run Away**

**House Bill No. 6285, An Act Concerning the Age of Child with Respect to Juvenile Court Jurisdiction**

Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Merit Lajoie and I am here today as a Tolland resident and concerned parent. Last year, my 17 year old son Ryan made some very irresponsible, impulsive and careless decisions yet very typical, common and characteristic of an immature 17 year old boy. His best friend was about to be sentenced to serve one year in jail and instead of taking responsibility for his actions, he fled court and became a wanted fugitive. Of course, Ryan was one of the first he contacted and after four days of staying close by, the two (plus one) decided to head south. Those four days were nothing more to me than lost opportunities; lost opportunities for both Ryan and his friend.

I attempted, on more than one occasion, to report Ryan as a missing person or a runaway, but without success. I spent hours on the telephone and internet looking for any assistance but again, without success. I reached out to everyone I knew for help, but it wasn't there because Ryan was 17.

Senate Bill No. 902 will help those parents that have the luxury of time to file a petition with the juvenile court for a determination of "youth in crisis." The bill is worth supporting because it is a reasonable attempt for parents seeking help to regain control of a frequent runaway child. This was not an option for me or Ryan.

House Bill No. 6285 proposes, in part, to change the age of juveniles from 16 to 18 with respect to juvenile court jurisdiction. Overall, I think this bill is seeking to address the unique needs of juveniles, while focusing on reform and/or rehabilitation rather than the juvenile being marked for life. I, for one, would like to encourage more pro-active measures that keep our juveniles out of the juvenile justice system to begin with. I have thought a lot about the age 18 for juveniles. My only concern with this part of the proposal is that I would not want the historical memory of a troubled juvenile, between the ages of 16 and 18, erased. That information could be critical to police officers,

prosecutors and judges that have interaction with an 18+ individual; one that hasn't learned to avoid the same mistakes they have made in the past.

Section 13 of the proposal establishes the Juvenile Jurisdiction Policy and Operations Coordinating Council. I would strongly urge the committee to amend the membership of the council to include meaningful parental representation. Parents, guardians, etc. are still considered the responsible party for juveniles, even the 16 and 17 year olds. Yet, parents have very little to say about the willing actions of these juveniles. I was unable to utilize law enforcement to bring Ryan home, yet if Ryan had been arrested, I would also be the first one that was called, and would have to appear in court with him, as his parent. Parents should not have to look to the juvenile justice system to seek assistance. The council is charged with, among other things, assessing various diversion programs, examining the needs of youth in crisis and examining school related issues for juveniles. Who knows these kids better than their parents?

Finally, I would also urge the committee to amend Section 13 of the proposal to require that the council examine the current policies and procedures of all police departments with respect to 16 and 17 year old juveniles who have not committed a criminal offense. This population of kids is really forgotten. Why do our children have to commit a crime to get any attention and/or help? I don't think that police generally want to be bothered with juveniles, unless a crime is involved and even then there is resistance. The council should examine the individual police department's response to juveniles and make recommendations to improve communities and juveniles relationships with the police departments and establish a better response to the immediate needs of these juveniles without relying on the juvenile justice system.

To summarize, juveniles are our future. Investing in their future is investing in our future. Ryan's friend is now serving two years in jail. It took time, patience, strength and courage but Ryan is hoping to graduate in June and then attend a trade school. I am invested in Ryan. I strongly urge the committee to invest in our future by investing in our youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Merit Lajoie  
Tolland, CT

