



KEEP THE PROMISE COALITION
Community Solutions, Not Institutions!
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Testimony before the Judiciary Committee
March 4, 2009
In Opposition to: HB 6386 and HB 6580

Good afternoon Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and members of the Judiciary committee. My name is Cheri Bragg, Coordinator of the statewide Keep the Promise Coalition. This Coalition was formed 10 years ago to ensure that a comprehensive, community mental health system was created and maintained. That promise has not been kept.

Nowhere are the results of the broken promise more readily apparent than in our criminal justice system. Currently almost 20% of people in CT's jails and prisons have been diagnosed with a mental illness. Department of Corrections officials confirm that an estimated 1,428 persons with moderate to serious mental illnesses are incarcerated for low-level, non-violent offenses¹ committed due to their untreated mental illness. **If we did a better job of treating people for mental illness early and in the community, we would save money and lives.** For instance, it costs only \$54.00 per day to support someone with mental illness in a Supportive Housing model. It costs \$183.00 per day, more than three times as much, to house someone in prison where they will get minimal treatment (if any) for their mental illness.

Any legislation delaying Raise the Age implementation would result in more young lives risked or lost. Youth who are 16 or 17 do not qualify for

¹As of October 2007, the Department of Corrections (DOC) reported that of the 3,897 inmates with mental health issues classified as level 3, 4 and 5, 1,741 were not convicted of, or on bond for, a violent or serious offense (46%). The DOC reports the Mental Health level 3 numbers to be inflated by approximately 20% because they include inmates with problems that are probably not directly attributable to serious psychiatric illness. This still leaves 1,428 inmates with moderate to serious mental illnesses who are in prison for low level offenses.

treatment in the adult system. Furthermore, youth tried in the adult system are more likely to reoffend more seriously and more frequently than if they were treated in the juvenile system. I know a young man who was incarcerated at 16 in Manson prison. During this time, one of his friends, another youth incarcerated at Manson, tragically committed suicide. I can assure you that he, along with other imprisoned youth, were further traumatized by this unnecessary tragedy. In addition, these youth are eventually discharged to our communities with the impact of additional trauma and without the benefit of having had age-appropriate treatment. This particular young man was consequently re-incarcerated bearing out earlier testimony. He also made the decision to start a family at a young age. Without an education or proper treatment, he is struggling to hold down low-paying jobs. He pays. His family pays. Our communities pay. Had he been incarcerated in a juvenile facility, he would have had the opportunity to pursue education and would have qualified for appropriate treatment.

With the number of empty beds in juvenile detention (more than 160 on February 26th, 2009) and other residential options, **it only makes sense to serve these youth where they have the best opportunity for treatment, services and the chance to pursue options that can lead to success as adults in the community.**

In addition, **we recommend full funding of the Family Support Centers.** These are the key to the new FWSN (Families With Service Needs) system and must be expanded to serve the 6 additional state-mandated areas in order for the system continuum to be effective throughout the state of CT. These Support Centers are working. Delinquency referrals to courts are down. FWSN referrals are also down which means that new systems and supports are working to divert youth from escalating in the system. **Keep the Promise to serve CT's youth with behavioral health needs in the least-restrictive setting possible by implementing Raise the Age and funding Family Support Centers: oppose HB6386 and HB6580.** Thank you for your time.