



Testimony before the Judiciary Committee
March 2, 2009
Opposition to HB 6386 and HB 6580

Good afternoon, Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Alicia Woodsby, and I am the Public Policy Director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, CT (NAMI-CT). I am here to testify today in opposition to both HB 6386, An Act Delaying Implementation of Legislation Raising the Age of Juvenile Jurisdiction, and HB 6580, An Act Concerning Juvenile Justice, which would delay the implementation of the Raise the Age legislation slated for implementation in January of 2010.

We urge the state to move forward with the funding necessary for on-time implementation of the new law raising the age of adulthood in Connecticut courts from 16 to 18 years old. Many of these youth have significant mental health and other needs that are not being addressed by the adult system. They should be in a structure that offers age-appropriate treatment, and helps them to become productive adults. Instead, these youth are placed directly into a gap within the services system making them ineligible for services in the juvenile system and inappropriate for services suitable for adults. The services available within the adult criminal justice system are not equipped to address their developmental needs.

Federal studies show that far too many kids who need mental health treatment, but fail to get it, land in the juvenile justice system – where an alarming 50-70% of youth have one or more psychiatric disorders. At least 20% of youth involved in the juvenile justice system have **serious** mental illnesses, including those that are suicidal, struggling with psychotic disorders, and other serious illnesses.¹ **Every day that passes before this change is implemented results in more children we “lose” to the adult system. We need to save as many children as possible.**

If young people with histories of trauma, neglect, abuse, and violence do not receive appropriate interventions, they are nearly 60% more likely to be arrested as juveniles, more likely to be arrested as adults, and more frequently commit violent offenses relative to others in the general population.²

In recent years, CT's juvenile justice system has shown signs that it is working. Delinquency referrals to court are down and there are more than 100 empty detention beds in the state on a regular basis. New systems and programs are working to divert youth from escalating deeper into the system. Full funding of the 6 additional state-mandated Family Support Centers will allow for adequate availability of an effective and cost-efficient system that ensures access to preventative services and programs. The state desperately needs access to developmentally

¹ National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice. *Blueprint for Change: A Comprehensive Model for the Identification and Treatment of Youth with Mental Health Needs in Contact with the Juvenile Justice System*. 2006.

²B.T. Kelley, T.P. Thornberry & C.A. Smith, *In the Wake of Childhood Maltreatment*, OJJDP JUV. JUST. BULL. (1997).

appropriate and rehabilitative responses to delinquency through the juvenile justice system. DCF recently indicated in their budget options that when transitioning youth with mental health needs cannot access appropriate services, it most often results in homelessness, arrests, hospitalization, and ER visits. We then risk losing these kids to cycles of homelessness and criminal justice involvement with great societal costs.

Please remember that youth in adult prisons do not receive adequate rehabilitation or treatment. Youth sent to the adult criminal justice system in Connecticut are not eligible for the same kinds of services such as therapy, diversion, or alternatives to incarceration that are available to young people in the juvenile justice system. Simply locking these kids up will not change their behaviors or improve public safety.

In addition, youth who are tried and incarcerated in the adult criminal system are more likely to re-offend, and re-offend more seriously and frequently than young people tried and treated in the juvenile system for the same crimes (Donna Bishop, PhD, Northeastern University).

The most serious and violent offenders will still go to adult court. In Connecticut, any juvenile, aged 14 or older, charged with a Class A or B Felony, the most serious and violent crimes, is automatically transferred to the adult court. Raise the Age would not change this practice—16 and 17 year-olds charged with Class A or B Felonies would still go to the adult court.

Please oppose any delays to implementation and unnecessary restrictions that will prevent this important policy change from moving forward.

Thank you for your time and attention.