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Testimony for Senate Bill 674

Good Morning Senator McDonald, Representative Lawler, Senator Kissel, Rep. O'Neill, and members of the committee. I am John McKinney, Senator from the 28th district. I am here today to testify in favor of Senate Bill 674, AN ACT CONCERNING LOCAL EXPENDITURES RELATED TO THE CHANGE IN THE AGE OF JUVENILE COURT JURISDICTION.

Two years ago, we passed legislation to "raise the age" of juvenile court jurisdiction in the state from sixteen to eighteen, effective next January. By doing so, we joined a majority of states that treat sixteen and seventeen year olds as juveniles when those teens commit minor criminal offenses or display delinquent behavior. The goals and purpose of the act are laudable in that they give young people an opportunity to learn from their mistakes without being exposed to consequences that may be too harsh or too permanent. In light of all the positive aspects of the legislation, it is not the goals of the law that this bill seeks to alter. Rather, it is the imposition of unintended consequences on our towns, and therefore on our taxpayers, by the raise the age law that we seek to put off for now.

Many times we pass laws with the very best of intentions, but without all the best information about how those laws will impact our communities. As we found when we passed our "in school suspension" law, we inadvertently placed an unfunded mandate on our towns to hire staff to supervise the program, as well as to provide sufficient space in already crowded schools in order to accommodate suspended students. So the worthy goal of keeping kids in school during times of suspension crashed headlong into the reality that the requirements we placed upon the towns were going to cost a significant amount of money to ensure compliance. Another recent example was the attempt to get all municipal public meeting minutes and agendas placed on town websites. This well intentioned law, to create greater access to public information, was seemingly innocuous. But after passage, we learned that it was forcing smaller towns to hire new employees, or to simply shut down existing municipal websites because they could not abide by this mandate. So, our attempt to create greater public access to certain documents actually ended up making that access more difficult in some small towns where websites were shuttered. As these two examples illustrate, laws passed in Hartford often have an unexpected fiscal impact on the towns that we charge with implementing and enforcing those laws.

The extent of the impact on municipalities from the "raise the age" law are largely unknown at this juncture. If towns are forced to find suitable space to hold a juvenile separate and apart from other arrested persons, or even from other juveniles, many will be hard pressed to do so without building or obtaining additional space. If towns are forced to make accommodations in their schools to deal with the presence of an arrested juvenile, many will be hard pressed to do so in their already crowded, and in some cases, overcrowded buildings. In these times of unprecedented fiscal hardships facing our towns and taxpayers, the imposition of new unfunded mandates into an already overstressed budget will be too great a burden for far too many. We need to be certain that the laws we pass here do not unintentionally force towns to spend money that they simply do not have, or to make choices to cut other programs that they simply shouldn't have to make. That is why this bill makes so much sense – it simply gives towns more time to comply with any aspect of the "raise the age" law that will mandate them to spend money in order to comply. It does not delay any other aspect of the law, will have no impact on how teens are treated on the state level. It simply provides relief to taxpayers if there is a fiscal burden imposed by the change. The end goal is worthy, and we will get to full compliance with the changes soon enough. We should not let our headstrong desire to get there too quickly be at the expense of forcing towns to make difficult decisions in these difficult times