



Testimony before the Judiciary Committee
April 1, 2011
Support for HB 6638
Opposition to SB 1164

Good afternoon, Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, 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 favor of HB 6638** which will help ensure smooth, on time implementation of "Raise the Age" for 17 year olds. NAMI-CT is also in favor of addressing the racial disparity in the state's juvenile justice system, which is included in HB 6634 in efforts to reduce Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC).

In addition, NAMI-CT is opposed to SB 1164 - which would delay the full implementation of the Raise the Age legislation slated for January 2012.

We urge the state to move forward with on-time implementation of the second phase of the raise the age implementation, which will bring seventeen year olds back to the juvenile court system. Many of these youth have significant mental health and other needs that are not addressed by the adult system. They should be in a structure that offers age-appropriate treatment, and helps them to become productive adults. The services available within the adult criminal justice system are not equipped to address their developmental needs.

The Raise the Age legislation already removed 4,000 16-year-olds from the adult system in 2010, and will remove 6,000 17-year-olds from the adult system in 2012. ***Kids tried in the juvenile system show lower recidivism rates than those tried in the adult system.*** Every day that we delay the implementation of the law will result in more kids we lose to the adult system.¹

The projected system increase for the 16 year olds was 40% with the actual increase being 22%, and the system is still smaller than it was just a few years ago. CT admissions have not seen any major impact. Moreover, the financial impact has been less than anticipated with nearly \$5 million in unspent dollars – largely due to smart investments in prevention, FWSN reform, Family Support Centers, and home-based interventions.²

The Family Support Centers allow for the availability of an effective and cost-efficient system that ensures access to preventative services and programs. The state desperately needs developmentally appropriate and rehabilitative responses to delinquency through the juvenile justice system. According to DCF, when transitioning youth with mental health needs cannot access appropriate services, it most often results in homelessness, arrests, hospitalization,

¹ CT Judicial Branch; CT Juvenile Justice Alliance

² CT Judicial Branch; CT Juvenile Justice Alliance

and ER visits. We then risk losing these kids to cycles of homelessness and criminal justice involvement with great societal costs.

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 mental health 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.³

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.⁴

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. 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).

Lastly, please remember that 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 does 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 from moving forward.

³ 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.

⁴B.T. Kelley, T.P. Thornberry & C.A. Smith, *In the Wake of Childhood Maltreatment*, OJJDP JUV. JUST. BULL. (1997).