

Judiciary Committee, Connecticut General Assembly  
Legislative Office Building  
300 Capitol Avenue  
Hartford, CT 06115

**RE: Testimony in Support of HB 5221**

February 28, 2014

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee:

As the Provincial of the New England Province of the Society of Jesus, I submit this testimony to urge you to **support HB 5221**, which would create parole eligibility rules tailored for juveniles serving lengthy prison sentences. The New England Province is one of nine U.S. regions of the Society of Jesus or Jesuits, a Catholic religious order of priests and brothers serving the Church in educational, pastoral, social and spiritual ministries. Jesuits of the New England Province serve as teachers, campus ministers and administrators at universities, high schools, and middle schools, including Fairfield Preparatory School and Fairfield University in the state of Connecticut. We also serve in parishes and as chaplains in hospitals, prisons and the military.

I write today in support of HB 5221. Our Catholic faith modeled in the life of Jesus, and in a particular way our Ignatian charism, urges us to reconcile with those who have wronged us and demands that look for the intrinsic good, the spark of the Creator, in all people. Pope Francis, our first Jesuit pope, has demonstrated this often over the last year: washing the feet of Muslim prisoners during lent, meeting with African immigrants detained in Italy and only a week ago welcoming prisoners on a pilgrimage to Rome into his home. Beyond our faith call, well-established scientific evidence shows that adolescents have underdeveloped brains that make them more impulsive, more susceptible to peer pressure, and more lacking in foresight than adults—which can turn thoughtless actions into tragic ones. Because of the differences in the brains of children and adults, children have a greater capacity than adults to rehabilitate. Yet current law in Connecticut denies many juveniles the chance to show they have grown, matured, worked hard to change their ways, and made amends for their mistakes. Worse still, it allows the judicial system to try children charged with certain crimes in adult court and subjects them to mandatory lengthy adult prison terms including life without the possibility of parole.

In Bridgeport and New Haven, Connecticut, our students at Fairfield Prep and Fairfield University work alongside community partners with low-income youth in the classroom and after school tutoring and mentoring programs. Our faculty members are engaged in research on juvenile justice reform. Our staff members are actively involved with community organizations like RYASAP and the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance working to codify appropriate sentencing guidelines for court involved youth and help juvenile offenders return to our communities. Through these interactions, we are well aware of the challenges facing inner-city youth in

Connecticut, realities that result in some young adults serving time in detention. However, we also know the capacity of these same youth for growth, change and reconciliation.

HB 5221 would create parole eligibility rules tailored for juveniles serving lengthy prison sentences. The legislation would not guarantee release, but allow young adults the chance for a parole hearing to demonstrate their personal growth and only after a substantial portion of the sentence is served. The bill also eliminates mandatory life-without-parole sentences for juveniles.

The New England Province of the Society of Jesus supports HB 5221 as sound public policy that promotes accountability and keeps communities safe. It does not allow for the premature release of inmates serving time in prison for serious offenses. Instead, it ensures that youth convicted of serious crimes have the chance to work towards release if they can prove, later in life, they have been rehabilitated.

We appreciate the Judicial Committee's consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Myles N. Sheehan S.J.", written over a large, faint watermark of the Society of Jesus (IHS) emblem.

V. Rev. Myles N. Sheehan, S.J.  
Provincial