TESTIMONY OF NEALY ZIMMERMANN, MA

In support of H.B. 5221

Judiciary Committee
Connecticut General Assembly

March 3, 2014

Dear Distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am Nealy Zimmermann, former executive director of the Connecticut Coalition to Improve End-of-Life Care, Inc. I submit this testimony in support of H.B. 5221 (An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission Regarding Lengthy Sentences for Crimes Committed by a Child or Youth and the Sentencing of a Child Convicted of a Felony Offense).

As a former volunteer for the Connecticut Department of Correction, I along with others helped develop a prison hospice program and assisted in training inmates in Connecticut correctional facilities to provide end-of-life care and bereavement services for their fellow inmates. I coordinated or co-coordinated the training of a couple hundred inmates to be hospice and bereavement volunteers for their fellow inmates at York, MacDougall-Walker, and Osborn Correctional Institutions.

The proposed legislation would provide a "meaningful opportunity" for a child sentenced as an adult for serious offenses to obtain release on parole after serving a portion of the child's sentence. I strongly urge enactment of this legislation. In my many experiences with our incarcerated population, I have gotten to know adult men and women who have exhibited remarkable change, maturation, and rehabilitation. These persons deserve a "meaningful opportunity" to obtain release on parole after serving a portion of their sentence.

In my extensive work with the prison hospice program in Connecticut correctional facilities, I encountered men and women who have dramatically rehabilitated and are now doing remarkable work. Some of these individuals have been inspiring to me personally. These individuals have exhibited a significant change in attitude and have expressed tremendous appreciation for the opportunity to be of service to their fellow inmates. They have become model citizens.

I worked with one particular inmate who is serving a thirty-eight year sentence for a crime which occurred when he was just seventeen years old. He is a hospice volunteer. And for the last few years, he has also worked as a Certified Nurse's Assistant. He was very helpful to the new inmate hospice volunteers in coping with their first dying patient. His experience with the prison hospice program exemplifies the transformation that many child offenders undergo

while incarcerated. He summed up his experiences beautifully in the following quote, which is included in my recently published article "Caring for Others Behind Prison Walls":

> How could I help other men see loss and grief as an exploration of opportunities instead of the often felt limitations of hopelessness? It seemed like a daunting task because as a man, I know we are often denied the opportunity to express our pain openly. Men are encouraged to hide pain by being strong, being in control, or covering it with anger. Prison environment further complicates things because of the fear that expression of sadness will make them appear weak and out of control.
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> To my relief, the training in this program not only addressed my concerns and taught me how to be an effective bereavement volunteer; it also deepened my understanding of myself. It was great that throughout the training the counselors constantly addressed our personal grief. They understood the importance that care for oneself allows one to be able to provide care for others.
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> I also learned that I didn't need to have the answers. I need to provide guidance that will help someone see that he has the answers: that he has the hope and power within himself because empowering someone is one of the greatest gifts you can give.
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> Ultimately, our goal as bereavement volunteers is to help someone acknowledge his loss and grief, and have his grief validated so with time he can reinvest in life. We have the privilege to journey with those in sorrow and let them know that they are not alone in this hard process regardless of who they are.[1]

This articulate, well-spoken man is evidence that individuals can rehabilitate and change. In my work with Connecticut's incarcerated population, I have seen first-hand that juveniles who commit serious crimes can change and mature into responsible, thoughtful adults. Therefore, I strongly support an opportunity to provide a "second look" at these long sentences given to children. The proposal under consideration does not mandate release of any individual, but it does provide a much-needed "meaningful opportunity" for persons convicted of crimes committed when they were children to obtain release on parole after serving a portion of their sentence.

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[1] Nealy Zimmermann, "Caring for Others Behind Prison Walls," in The Arts of Contemplative Care, Cheryl A. Giles and Willa B. Miller, eds. (2012).