

**Testimony of  
Quinnipiac University School of Law's Black Law Student Association  
UConn School of Law's Black Law Student Association**

**Judiciary Committee**

**March 3, 2014**

**H.R. No. 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 or Youth Convicted of Certain Felony Offenses**

Good Morning legislators, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of this proposed legislation. My name is Olivia West. I am a resident of Canton, CT and I am a 3<sup>rd</sup> year law student at Quinnipiac University School of Law, where I serve as the President of the Black Law Students Association (BLSA). I am here today to speak on behalf of Quinnipiac and UConn School of Law's local BLSA chapters, as we unite in support of Raised House Bill. No. 5221. We urge the legislature to provide a method of review to individuals serving lengthy sentences for crimes committed under the age of eighteen.

Quinnipiac's and UConn's BLSA chapters are local chapters of the National Black Law Students Association. NBLSA is the largest student run organization in the United States and is composed of six regions and over 200 chapters. On the local and national level, our goal is not only to articulate the needs and objectives of Black law students, but to also work towards addressing the needs of the Black community by bringing about meaningful legal and political change.

In 2012, the National Black Law Students Association, as part of its Judicial Advocacy Program, joined the Juvenile Law Center in an Amicus Curiae brief to the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Miller v. Alabama* case. The brief argued that life without the possibility of parole is unconstitutional when imposed on juveniles for homicide offenses. In the *Miller* case, the Court ultimately prohibited mandatory life-without-parole sentences for juveniles and thus extended its 2010 decision in *Graham v. Florida*, which held that it is unconstitutional to sentence juveniles to life without parole for non-homicide offenses.<sup>i</sup>

As a response to BLSA's ongoing advocacy for crucial change in the black community, and the compelling need for reform in this particular area, we support the passing of this bill, in hopes to rectify an ongoing concern and problem affecting our youth in Connecticut.

In Connecticut, we face a great disparity in our criminal justice system. While only 10% of our state population is Black, we represent 42% of the incarcerated population.<sup>ii</sup> Connecticut has one of the highest discrepancies in the nation when it comes to the rate of incarceration for Blacks and Whites.<sup>iii</sup> This grave disparity is exacerbated when one looks specifically at juvenile offenders under the age of eighteen: Blacks and Hispanics represent 88% of the individuals serving adult sentences of more than 10 years for crimes committed as juveniles, and 92% of those serving 50 years or more. What is most disturbing is that 100% of juvenile offenders

serving life-without-parole sentences are Black.<sup>iv</sup> This data reveals that Black youth are being incarcerated more, and for longer periods of time, than their Hispanic counterparts, and significantly more than their White counterparts.

For these reasons, it is imperative that the Legislature considers reform in this area. Not only is this a national concern, but the disparity in our own state is revoltingly alarming and problematic. This bill provides an opportunity to address this issue.

On Behalf Of:

Quinnipiac School of Law's Black Law Student Association

University of Connecticut School of Law's Black Law Student Association

By:

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<sup>i</sup> *Graham v. Florida*, 560 U.S. 48 (2010); *Miller v. Alabama*, 132 S. Ct. 2455 (2012).

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Census (2010); Connecticut Department of Correction (2013).

<sup>iii</sup> Marc Mauer & Ryan King, Sentencing Project, *Uneven Justice: State Rates of Incarceration By Race and Ethnicity* (July 2007).

<sup>iv</sup> Data received from the Department of Correction, Sept. 2011.