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March 3, 2014

Written 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 or Youth Convicted of Certain Felony Offenses

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee:

Connecticut treats children charged with certain serious crimes as adults. These children are transferred to adult court, where, if convicted, they face decades-long sentences. Many convictions carry no possibility of parole, whereas others require the individuals to serve 85% of the sentence before having the opportunity for a parole hearing. Thus, a 16-year-old serving a 50-year sentence without parole, will not see the outside of a prison until age 66, no matter how much he changes and grows over the course of his life.

However, Connecticut has signaled its support for reforming the juvenile sentencing system. For two years in a row, the Connecticut Sentencing Commission has recommended legislation to reform how the state sentences and paroles young people. HB 5221 would eliminate unconstitutional mandatory life-without-parole sentences for children under 18 and would require courts to consider youth-related criteria when sentencing children. The bill also would create special parole proceedings for individuals convicted of serious crimes as children.

This bill does not guarantee release but, rather, provides the opportunity for a parole hearing after a substantial portion of the sentence has been served. This exact bill passed the House almost unanimously in 2013, but unfortunately was never called for a vote in the Senate before the end of the legislative session. The Connecticut legislature now has the chance to create a system that takes into account children's youth and capacity for change.

The enclosed report, *I'm Going to Move Forward: Stories of Change from Men Imprisoned as Children in Connecticut*, was originally published in 2013 by the Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School. The report contains accounts from ten individuals who, as children, were convicted of serious crimes and who are now serving sentences ranging from 20 to 50 years. The men describe their experiences growing up in prison, the steps they have taken to change, and their hopes of rejoining their families and making a positive contribution to their communities.

One man with whom we spoke told us, *"I live each day with the knowledge of what I have done, and I wish so bad that there was a way to change that terrible day. However, that reality is impossible. If there's one thing I do know, and can do something about, it's the fact that I can change the future as it pertains to myself. Furthermore, I know that I owe way more than this 30 year sentence, in terms of me actually giving back."*

The proposed reforms recognize what common sense, science, and the U.S. Supreme Court already tell us: Children can change. Serious crimes would not go unpunished; individuals could still receive and would still be serving long sentences. The reforms would, however, give the opportunity for parole to individuals who, after a decade or more of incarceration, exhibit growth, maturity, and the desire to reform their lives.