

TESTIMONY OF ALAN BRUCE IN SUPPORT OF SB 796

March 4, 2015, Judiciary Committee

My name is Alan Bruce. I am a professor of sociology and director of the criminal justice program at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT, and a resident of West Hartford, CT. I write in strong support of SB 796 and urge that it be passed into law.

Connecticut has made significant progress in its treatment of juvenile offenders in recent years, perhaps most significantly through 2007 legislation to raise the age at which individuals are eligible to be processed through the juvenile justice system from 16 to 18 years. Passage of SB 796 is consistent with rationale implicit in the decision to raise the age in the juvenile justice system.

SB 796 calls for creation of the opportunity to review lengthy sentences given to individuals for crimes committed when they were juveniles. Widely accepted empirical evidence indicates brain maturity does not occur until early adulthood and juveniles are highly susceptible to peer influence; engage in impulsive behavior; and are unable to fully understand the implications of their actions. As brain development occurs, individuals gain greater control over their behavior; are less susceptible to peer pressure; and more capable of understanding the implications of their behavior. SB 796 asks that the accepted scientific evidence on brain development be translated into responsible legislation by creating the opportunity for individuals who committed crimes as juveniles, and so before full brain development, to be given the opportunity to have their sentences reviewed with the *possibility* of parole for those judged suitable. Given that we recognize individuals are less responsible for their behavior prior to age 18 we should not sentence these individuals as if they are fully developed adults.

Passage of SB 796 would also be consistent with US Supreme Court rationale in *Miller v. Alabama* (2012), in which the court established that mandatory life without parole sentences for juveniles are unconstitutional, in part, because juveniles are less responsible for their behavior than adults. Similarly in *Roper v. Simmons* (2005) capital punishment for juveniles was ruled unconstitutional again in part due to recognition that juveniles have not yet reached full cognitive development and that this is a mitigating factor in dealing with juveniles.

It is time for Connecticut to further demonstrate its recognition of the “mitigating qualities of youth” evident in the decision to raise the age of jurisdiction in the juvenile justice system by passing SB 796 and give the opportunity for individuals serving lengthy sentences for crimes committed when they were juveniles to have their sentences reviewed. Passing SB 796 will allow Connecticut to continue as one of the leading states in juvenile justice reform.