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**TESTIMONY OF AFRICAN CARIBBEAN AMERICAN PARENTS  
OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, INC. (AFCAMP)  
BEFORE THE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE  
IN SUPPORT OF COMMITTEE BILL NO. 796 AN ACT CONCERNING LENGTHY SENTENCES FOR  
CRIMES COMMITTED BY A CHILD OR YOUTH CONVICTED OF CERTAIN FELONY OFFENSES**

**MARCH 4, 2015**

Submitted by: Ann R. Smith, JD, MBA, Executive Director

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities, Inc. (AFCAMP) in support of legislation to provide review of long adult prison sentences imposed on children and to allow courts to consider youth-related factors in sentencing children transferred to adult court. AFCAMP is a parent-driven nonprofit organization with a mission to educate, empower and engage parents and community to improve quality of life for children with special needs and others at risk of education inequity or system involvement. I am also speaking as co-chair of the Children's Committee of the Keep the Promise Coalition. We are testifying in support of this legislation as we did last year when a similar bill passed the House by a vote of 137-4, but was not called for a vote in the Senate.

AFCAMP endeavors to advocate for important reform in the juvenile justice system in Connecticut. We strongly urge enactment of legislation that would allow juvenile offenders serving lengthy sentences a meaningful opportunity, after service of a portion of the sentence, to obtain release before the end of that term by demonstrating increased maturity and rehabilitation.

There is a documented high rate of confluence between children with juvenile justice contact and children who have various physical, mental, and emotional needs. We also know that many of the behaviors that lead youth to commit crimes are all too often the result of unmet behavioral and mental health needs. 64 percent of children involved in the juvenile justice system in Connecticut have a mental

health condition.<sup>1</sup>Nationally, substance abuse is linked to 78 percent of cases in which juveniles are taken into custody.<sup>2</sup> The proposed changes to parole eligibility rules will allow the justice system to consider whether youth have had an opportunity to access rehabilitation and treatment services. That adolescents have underdeveloped brains making them more impulsive than adults, susceptible to peer pressure, and lacking in foresight has been well-established scientifically and recognized by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Graham v. Florida*, 130 S. Ct. 2011 (2010) and *Miller v. Alabama*, 132 S. Ct. 2455 (2012). The implications of this evidence as it concerns juveniles' level of culpability and likelihood of successful rehabilitation has been reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court.

It is distressing that the burden of serving long sentences has fallen disproportionately on minorities: more than 80% of individuals serving sentences of 10 years or more for crimes committed under age 18 are African American or Latino. Questions must be raised about the extreme disproportionate number of minority juveniles serving long sentences.

Lastly, we wish to point out that the cost of providing juvenile offenders serving long sentences a meaningful opportunity for release would not be significant. There are less than 300 people serving sentences of more than 10 years for crimes committed under the age of 18. Review would occur after the individual has served a significant period of his or her sentence. Because each person is serving a different sentence, hearings would be staggered. Public safety would not be jeopardized because a second look would in no way guarantee release.

AFCAMP urges you to act favorably on Committee Bill No. 796.

Respectfully submitted,

Ann R. Smith

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<sup>1</sup> Connecticut Behavioral Health Services for Young Adults Task Force Report, 2014

<sup>2</sup> CASA Columbia (2004). Accessed: <http://www.casacolumbia.org/addiction-research/reports/substance-abuse-juvenile-justice-children-left-behind>