March 4, 2015

Testimony of Julia Rosenheim
Juvenile Justice Legislative Captain
Yale College Democrats

206 Elm Street, B21
New Haven, CT 06511

In favor: H.B. 6926
An Act Concerning Lengthy Sentences For Crimes Committed By A Child Or Youth

My name is Julia Rosenheim and on behalf of the Yale College Democrats, I urge the committee to pass Senate Bill 796. This proposal is a necessary reform of Connecticut's juvenile justice laws, and it does not compromise public safety since a release would only be granted after thorough review by parole boards.

Last Friday, the state Supreme Court ruled that it is the legislature's job to decide whether juveniles convicted of life sentences should be granted parole hearings. This session, the committee has the opportunity to recognize the importance of acting now on this proposal. Scientific evidence shows that juveniles are much more likely to reform their ways than adults and that significant brain development occurs during and after adolescence. In addition, many juveniles serving time come from backgrounds of poverty, violence, and external pressures and passing this bill would finally allow for successful rehabilitation. It is unfounded and unjust to sentence a juvenile to life without parole considering such circumstances. And this session, the public will express again that under current law, Connecticut acts unconstitutionally considering the Supreme Court's 2012 Miller v. Alabama decision.

You will again hear about the importance of this bill from those who have personal connections to the prison system. I tutor an inmate at Manson Youth Prison once a week, and I have gotten to know him well. Every Saturday he uses his free time to sit with me and improve his analytical reasoning and math skills. He is bright and is interested in constitutional law, and he has taught me many things; it is clear that he is motivated to work hard to better himself. I know that there are many individuals currently serving time who have spent years in educational and rehabilitative programs and who are different people than they were when they were convicted. I am not here to offer a statement about whether any individual should be released or not, but I do know that they deserve the opportunity for a parole hearing. Passing this bill is not only the right thing to do considering all the expert advice about prison reform, the abundance of scientific evidence on brain development, or even the 2012 Miller v. Alabama ruling. Passing this bill is also the right thing to do for all the individuals who would be assets to their communities given the opportunity for parole.

This session, however, you might notice the increased passion with which we stand here and explain how Connecticut can become an example to the nation by improving its juvenile justice laws. Last session, the Yale College Democrats came to Hartford with 451 signed letters from young people in Connecticut who wanted to see reform in these ways. This year, young people have shown even more support for this bill and even more enthusiasm. Today, we

prove again how important this issue is to young people. I have here 929 letters, all signed by individuals in Connecticut, both Republicans and Democrats, who understand the gravity of this opportunity and want to express to the committee that the time is now for this bill to pass.

As a citizen of Connecticut who wants to see more justice in our justice system, I strongly urge the committee to pass Senate Bill 796 as soon as possible.

Thank you for your time.