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**Testimony on Governor's Bill No. 18  
An Act Concerning the Second Chance Society  
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American Conservative Union Foundation**

Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on "An Act Concerning the Second Chance Society". I am Director of the American Conservative Union Foundation's Center for Criminal Justice Reform and a leader of Right on Crime, a national movement of conservatives supporting sensible and proven reforms to our criminal justice system – policies that will keep the public safe while containing prison costs.

Raising the age of jurisdiction for juvenile courts is a policy with which ACUF strongly agrees. Research shows that young people who go through the juvenile justice system are 34 percent less likely to break the law again than those who go to the adult system.

And that makes sense. Looking back on our adolescent years, few of us would describe ourselves as having been mature when we were 17, nor do we want be remembered for some of the stupid decisions we made back then.

Our brains were still developing, and we didn't have good judgment. We have learned a lot since the age of adult court was set at 18. Neuroscience tells us that brain development continues into the mid-twenties. The prefrontal cortex, which helps us foresee the consequences of our actions and exercise restraint, is the last area of the brain to develop. So young people well into their twenties still possess a great capacity to reform.

We can all agree that breaking the law is wrong, and that these teens deserve consequences for their bad actions. But tossing them into adult jails with hardened criminals just makes a bad situation worse.

There are a couple of principles that should guide us in handling youths who violate our laws. A foremost principle guiding the juvenile justice

system is that youths must be held accountable for their wrongful deeds, particularly if they have harmed someone. They must learn that their actions have consequences, and the system should be predicated upon helping youngsters live better lives, taking advantage of the full realm of rehabilitative capabilities of our youth.

That won't happen in prison. Adult prisons are very dangerous for teens. They are more likely to be raped, assaulted, and commit suicide. They are also likely to learn a lot more about leading a life of crime from the hardened criminals they share the prison with. There is much truth in the notion that jails and prisons are graduate schools of crime. Vegetables take on the flavor of the stew pot.

There is little chance that they will leave prison better than they go in. The skills these kids develop to defend themselves inside an adult prison will make them more dangerous when they get out.

Dr. John di Iulio, the noted conservative researcher, has written, "(M)ost kids who get into serious trouble with the law need adult guidance. And they won't find suitable role models in prison. Jailing youth with adult felons under Spartan conditions will merely produce more street gladiators."

Is that what we want? Why would we give up so easily on these young people without giving them a chance to turn their lives around?

Putting less serious young offenders into the juvenile justice system, where they are more likely to reform, is good policy. Extending the ability to keep convictions out of the public record up to age 25 is also good policy and will ensure that more reformed young people have a shot at decent jobs.

The juvenile system provides offenders a chance to rehabilitate themselves. They continue their schooling, receive job training, drug treatment, and mental health services. On the other hand, there are few such programs in adult prisons.

Let's be clear: this is not a get-out-of-trouble-free card for anyone. The juvenile justice system demands accountability. And it involves families and communities -- the societal structures that are most likely to put kids on the right path. Making this change will help turn today's troubled youngsters into tomorrow's productive, taxpaying, law-abiding citizens. That is being both right and smart on crime.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this bill. I hope that Connecticut will lead the nation in recognizing the benefit of extending juvenile jurisdiction past 18. Thank you for the privilege of testifying on this important policy issue.

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