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Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 75, An Act Concerning Detained Youth

Representative Urban, Senator Bartolomeo and distinguished members of the Committee on Children. My name is David McGuire, I am Legislative and Policy Director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT) and I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 75, An Act Concerning Detained Youth.

It has been increasingly clear over the past few years that young people involved in Connecticut's juvenile justice system are extremely vulnerable and need a safe and therapeutic environment. As such, it is imperative that we ensure that young people in the custody of the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Correction have access to meaningful behavioral and mental health services and require such departments to limit instances of seclusion and restraint to individuals twenty years of age and older.

This bill acknowledges that the goal of our juvenile justice system is rehabilitation, not punishment. Placement in punitive facilities without access to rehabilitative services can result in irreparable harm to young people. This population is particularly vulnerable to the damaging psychological effects of isolation, including extreme loneliness, anxiety, rage, and depression, among other potentially debilitating emotional and psychological consequences.

The ACLU-CT has been concerned about the treatment of young people at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS) for some time. Our concerns were confirmed when the Office of the Child Advocate released critical reports and alarming videos showing youth being forcefully restrained and secluded at the facility. This bill is critical because it will ensure that CJTS is therapeutic and rehabilitative environment during the institution's wind down period.

The bill also includes the Department of Correction and the Judicial Branch as agencies whose use of restraint and seclusion will be monitored. Additionally, the Department of Children and Families, in collaboration with the Judicial Branch and the Department of Correction, will be required to submit a plan to prevent or reduce the long-term negative impact of mental, emotional and behavioral health issues on children and youth twenty years of age or younger who are held in secure detention or correctional confinement. This comprehensive approach is sensible and will ensure that all young people in the state's custody are treated fairly.

For these reasons the ACLU-CT urges this committee to support this bill and ensure that young people in Connecticut's juvenile system are treated responsibly and humanely.