

Testimony in support of HB 7786
Submitted by Together We Rise CT
March, 20 2017

Dear Senator Doyle, Senator Kissel, Representative Tong and members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Colleen Shaddox. I am chair of the Political Action Committee of Together We Rise CT. Our group began as a handful of East Haddam residents who oppose discrimination in all of its forms and work for justice. We now have members throughout the state. We hold a weekly vigil that draws about 80 people dedicated to these principles, and we promote civic engagement to help our neighbors become more involved in our democracy. About 700 people – and growing every day – are part of our email action network and join us for various events. I personally have worked in justice reform for a dozen years and have consulted for the National Campaign to Reform State Juvenile Justice Systems, the National Juvenile Defender Center, the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance and many other reform organizations. This testimony is not affiliated with any of these clients, however. I'm speaking solely on behalf of Together We Rise CT.

Children do not belong in adult prisons.

As a group dedicated to human rights, we oppose this practice in the strongest possible terms.

They are not safe in adult prisons

Children are at risk of victimization in adult facilities, as affirmed by the Prison Rape Elimination Commission convened by President George W. Bush.¹ The suicide rate for kids in adult facilities is eight times that of youth in juvenile facilities and 36 times that of adult inmates.²

Adult prisons do not meet their educational or developmental needs

Services are more readily available in the juvenile justice system and are specifically designed for adolescents. Under Commissioner Theresa Lanz, the Department of Corrections changed its mission statement to: "The Connecticut Department of Correction shall protect the public, protect staff and provide safe, secure and humane supervision of offenders with opportunities that support successful community reintegration." While that represents real progress, public safety still comes first and human beings are still seen as "offenders."

¹ National Prison Rape Elimination Commission Report. June 2009.

² Community Research Center. 1980. "Juvenile Suicides in Adult Jails." Juvenile Transfer Series. US Department of Justice. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

The practice harms youth of color

The December, 2016 census at Manson was 54 percent black and 27 percent Hispanic, mirroring the racism that is inherent throughout our criminal justice system. Make no mistake: We would rather these young men not be involved in the justice system at all. We would rather that they lived in communities where their basic needs were met, where they had access to excellent schools and a wide range of positive youth development opportunities. But since the state will not invest in these things, we ask that it at least stop putting them in a dangerous environment.

This practice is unnecessary

In Massachusetts, for example, the Department of Youth Services, houses people convicted as adults until they reach age 21. I have worked with justice reform groups in Massachusetts for 10 years and have never heard a hint of criticism about this policy. Indeed, the state's Department of Corrections welcomes the opportunity to send young people to professionals who are trained and equipped to handle them.

Please keep in mind that just because it has "Youth" in its name does not mean that Manson is equipped to serve young people. York is an adult prison with such a low population of girls that it is impossible to develop appropriate programming for them and they are at risk of being put in de facto solitary conditions.

We would rather that no child was put in a cell. But if we must persist in incarcerating young people, juvenile detention is a much better environment, and one that our neighboring state has long used successfully.

HB 7786 also provides a path to meet the needs of at-risk youth

The legislature has wisely taken away the state's power to lock up children because they need help – youth who do not have a safe home; or youth who are a danger to themselves. This legislation takes an important next step by requiring investigation of the necessary services for youth in these groups. We are glad the state has stopped hurting them – now we want the state to help them.

The bill also creates a centralized service system for truant youth, another group that has thankfully been removed from the juvenile court. We cannot think of a more proactive use of our tax dollars.

Our group came together late last year over new concerns about human rights. But the rights of children of color, children in poverty and children with disabilities have long been violated by the American system of criminalization. This system is especially harmful to boys and young men of color – not by accident, but by design.

As more Connecticut citizens become involved in their government, you will see more and more support for enlightened policies that help children rather than locking them up. It is simply the right thing to do – in addition to being the best way to reduce crime in our communities and divert money from the sinkhole of

incarceration

Thank you for your attention.

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