I am submitting this written testimony in support of PHB-6883- An Act Concerning A "CORRECTIONS TO COLLEGE" PIPELINE FOR YOUTHFUL OFFENDERS, submitted by Representatives Christopher Rosario and Andre Baker. I worked with both these legislators to craft this bill because represents an issue that has affect me and many people in the community we live. As a former youthful offender, and now a pardon recipient, I know how hard it is to rebuild a life post-incarceration.

I left Manson Youth Institute at 19 years old determined never to go back to prison but, shortly after my release, I found there were not strong systems in place to help me achieve that goal. I had a parole office that I was required to check in with 3 times a week, but I did not have a career or education counselor to help me get back in school or choose a career that was suitable for me. I had a drug counselor for my use of marijuana, a drug that we are looking to make legal in this state now, but I did not have a mental health counselor to help me re-adjust to society and help me deal with the trauma of living in a cell for 23 hours a day. These conditions coupled with a lack of resources can cause Post Traumatic Stress and if not addressed properly, can display itself in behaviors that can lead to re-incarceration.

I'm thankful to say that I've achieved my goal of never going back to prison, but it was not because of anything external. It was my internal discipline, dedication, and determination to stick to that goal that caused me not to re-offend. It was those 3 Ds that helped me stay committed to the vision that I had for my life. It was my persistence that led me to graduate from college without financial aid, start a landscaping business when I could not get a job, and write a book titled Youthful Offender that chronicled my journey post incarceration. Last year, my persistence and reformed lifestyle allowed me the opportunity to get a full pardon from the state of CT and it's that persistence that has helped me to carve out a space as an advocate for criminal and juvenile justice reform in this state and beyond. Unfortunately, not everyone in my shoes has the same form of persistence and consistency and I've watched countless peers re-offend, even if they did not want to.

People make their own choices in life, but if there are systems in place to help them overcome personal and societal obstacles, the choices become a bit easier to make, but I firmly believe that if we give young people, under 21, this required structure upon release, it will lead to reduced recidivism and healthier family structures which will lead an increase in individual productivity and decrease in criminal activity to the locations where individuals are being released to, which are mostly our cities.

It is my hope that you will consider this testimony in your discussions and weigh the fact that you have the opportunity to reshape the future of communities of color in this state by simply giving people a systemic way to restart their lives and change the narrative from school to prison to corrections to college.

Kirk A. Wesley