March 11, 2023

Dear Chairs Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Jordyn Wilson and I am a Justice Advisor at the Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA). The CTJA is a statewide youth-adult partnership working to end the criminalization of youth. The Alliance includes Justice Staff, Justice Advisors, and Steering Committee members, which include lawyers, researchers, clinicians, and social workers, who work across issues areas such as mental/behavioral health, family advocacy, substance abuse, youth services, LGBTQ+ issues, legal representation, education, community and residential services, and public policy reform.

I'm writing this testimony to communicate my strong support for HB 6888 AN ACT CONCERNING JUVENILE JUSTICE, specifically section 6. Youth under 18 do not belong in the Department of Correction. This bill as written will require the state to create a plan to remove youth under 18 from the custody of DOC to the Judicial Branch. I believe this is a first, and necessary, step to removing our youth from prisons but I would urge this body to expand this age to be considerate of our emerging adults (ages 18 through 25) as well as consider removing our youth from prison-like environments in its entirety. We know due to research and science that adolescent brains develop through the age of 25. This period of development is associated with greater impulsiveness and stronger emotional responses than older adulthood and this is a critical period to be providing rehabilitative support and efforts to our young people in their communities- not inhumane and punitive practices like incarceration, like R.E.G.I.O.N.S., and so many more.

Currently, Connecticut is one of the states with the most youth under 18 in adult prisons. For us to trail second behind Florida, I am absolutely disgusted, and this must end now. Most of the youth in Manson Youth Institution (DOC) are there pre-trial, meaning not even found guilty of their alleged offense, and over 30 percent are more likely to be re-arrested after returning to their community than young people who stayed in the youth system. This is an issue. Not only an issue of practicality, but a racial justice issue. 80 percent of those being held are Black or Brown, meaning to me that Black and Brown kids receive no adequate care, or services as their white counterparts who are offered opportunities systematically, and socially the ability to make more mistakes. We disproportionately tell our Black and Brown youth that you behaved erratically, you should have known better, and punish them substantially harsher than we do our white youth, and this, along with locking our kids up to begin with, is ineffective, and morally wrong.

We need to be having a conversation of removing youth from DOC, but also a conversation of removing youth from prison-like environments in its entirety. I previously worked at Boys and Girls Village Milford REGIONS, which is a staff secure facility operated by Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division, while working at CTJA. I often was conflicted about my role in both capacities as
an advocate, and as a “Mental Health Worker”. I did my best to offer real support and transparency to
the youth in my care, and often thought of them as I advocated throughout CT and at the Capitol—
however I knew the program wasn’t enough. I felt defeated when I would hear of zero success
stories, or have a colleague of mine give me an update, and it consisted of a young person going back
to detention, or worse MYI. Through my work at CTJA, we’ve been appreciative of the opportunity to
engage with people currently in the custody of the Department of Corrections, and nothing angered
me more than my previous visit to a prison in Connecticut when I saw one of my previous Boys and
Girls Village youth. He was supposed to be a success story, and will one day, with adequate support
and care. He will one day when we remove the chains of incarceration from his wrists, ankles and
especially his life. The Judicial Branch offered no adequate support for this man, and neither will the
Department of Correction if we continue to ignore what our young people are asking for before their
first entry and touch point to the system. Most of the practice that the Judicial Branch uses is better
than DOC’s, since they are built to work with young people. Better yet, everything mental health
professionals, credible messengers, therapists, restorative justice practitioners, mentors, and family
supports do, is better than what the Judicial Branch does. We need to be providing our young people
with services and support, like those section 1 of this bill mentions creating, prior to their first arrest
to begin with. A lot of the issues young people are facing as barriers are rooted in generational
problems that are not new. We have continuously been having these conversations, and if the
response is met with bad bills like the things in HB 6889, we can expect to be here for generations
more.

Today, I urge the members of the Judiciary Committee to support HB 6888 and pass it out of
committee. Thank you for your time.

Jordyn Wilson