Dear Co-Chairs Winfield and Stafstrom, Ranking Members Kissel and Fishbein, and distinguished Members of the Committee on Judiciary of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Lauren Ruth, and I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children (CT Voices), a research-based advocacy organization working to ensure that Connecticut is a thriving and equitable state where all children achieve their full potential.

Connecticut Voices for Children is testifying in support of S.B. 952: An Act Concerning Parole Eligibility for an Individual Serving a Lengthy Sentence for a Crime Committed Before the Individual Reached the Age of Twenty-Five.

CT Voices supports S.B. 952, which allows individuals serving lengthy sentences for crimes they committed as young adults to apply for parole. Specifically, if a person is sentenced for committing a crime (or crimes) before the age of 25 and is serving a sentence of 20-50 years, they may request a parole hearing after serving at least 60 percent of their sentence. If a person is sentenced for committing a crime (or crimes) before the age of 25 and is serving a sentence of more than 50 years, they may request a parole hearing after serving 30 years. The Board of Pardons and Parole may determine that an individual is eligible for parole if the person has demonstrated rehabilitation and is unlikely to commit further crimes.

Connecticut statute already allows for these parole hearings when individuals serve lengthy sentences for crimes committed as minors.

As research on human development continues evolving, the scientific community has reached a consensus that the human brain continues maturing through young adulthood. This finding of a “maturity gap” in between younger adults and older adults making psychosocial decisions is robust. A study of over 5,200 people ages 10-30 in 11 countries compared cognitive capacity, which undergirds logical thinking, to psychosocial maturity, which undergirds individuals’ ability to practice restraint in the face of emotional stimuli. To measure cognitive capacity, the study measured working memory and verbal fluency. To measure psychosocial maturity, the study utilized an array of behavioral tasks to assess sensation seeking, delay discounting and future orientation, cost sensitivity and restraint, and impulse control. It found that average performance on cognitive capacity tasks leveled out around age 16 but performance on psychosocial maturity continued developing past age 18.

The specifics of how the brain develops in young adults continue to unfold. Yale University researcher BJ Casey and her colleagues have found evidence that the circuits communicating information between parts of the brain don’t develop bi-directionally. The circuitry that sends information from the part of the brain
primarily responsible for monitoring and reacting to threat (the amygdala) to the part of the brain that processes and regulates emotions (the prefrontal cortex) develops earlier than the pathway that sends regulatory information from the prefrontal cortex to the amygdala. Casey’s hierarchical circuit connectivity model finds that young adults are still developing regulatory processes during emotionally charged situations because the brain is still developing circuitry to attenuate the amygdala’s reactivity.

Additionally, the circuitry sending signals from lateral prefrontal cortex to the limbic system also continues developing into adulthood. This circuitry helps to shift attention and reappraise information.\(^3\)

Taken together, the shifting weight of signaling being sent from the cortex to the limbic system accounts for much of why older adults are less emotionally reactive than younger adults; the brains of older adults have more developed circuitry that feeds information to the limbic system to reduce “false alarms” to threat.

As behavioral and neuroscientific research continues to illuminate how the young adult brain develops, more states have taken efforts to adapt their legal systems appropriately. Both Washington DC and the state of Washington have already extended *Miller v. Alabama*, which held that mandatory life sentences without parole were unconstitutional for people under 18, to young adults.\(^4\) And in his majority opinion in *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, which held that *Miller v. Alabama* applied retroactively, Justice Kennedy stated that the most severe punishments including life without parole should be reserved for individuals who exhibit “permanent incorrigibility.”\(^5\) We believe that while young people are still developing psychosocial maturity, it is unjust to treat young people as “permanently incorrigible” and sentence them as such.

Connecticut Voices for Children urges the committee to pass S.B. 952: An Act Concerning Parole Eligibility for an Individual Serving a Lengthy Sentence for a Crime Committed Before the Individual Reached the Age of Twenty-Five.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Lauren Ruth, Ph.D.
Research & Policy Fellow
Connecticut Voices for Children

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