

Teen Prisoner's Mom: Raise The Age

by Melinda Tuhus | March 5, 2009 2:17 PM |



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Melinda Tuhus Photo

HARTFORD — “I don’t understand why they have this idea that sending kids to jail is gonna help them,” cried Katherine Gonzalez (pictured), the mother of a 15-year-old boy who sits in prison alongside adult offenders.

“No, it’s not gonna help them.”

Gonzalez, of New Haven, spoke tearfully at a press conference at the Legislative Office Building, organized by the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance to press the state legislature to stick to its original implementation date of January 1, 2010 for raising the age from 16 to 18 at which individuals are treated as adults in the criminal justice system. Gov. M. Jodi Rell has called for postponing the date by two years as a cost-saving measure to help deal with the state’s budget deficit..

Gonzalez, who works and goes to school, has a 15-year-old son in prison at Manson Correctional Institution in Cheshire. She said his conviction stemmed from an incident last summer, when at age 14, he slipped out of the house to visit a friend, and accidentally shot her with a BB gun. Gonzalez said the girl was not badly hurt, but her son was sentenced to five years, three years in prison and two years on probation. She said he has bipolar disorder and ADHD and is depressed but won’t take any medications because he’s afraid of what might be in them.

“What Carlos did was wrong and he should be held accountable for it. He was irresponsible. But he is not a criminal,” she said. In her written testimony she added,

“What my son did was no different than an accident the vice president of the United States had the year before. No one arrested Dick Cheney.”

At the press conference she concluded, “I know there’s a lot of empty slots in juvenile programs and I don’t understand why they have this idea that sending kids to jail is gonna help them. No, it’s not gonna help them,” she cried. “Do you want to see our kids getting education and training, or do you want to see them in jail with adults? If you want to give him some kind of punishment, put him in a youth program to teach him how to be a better person. Don’t send him to jail.” Click [">here to hear more of her testimony.](#)

In a hearing room, New Haven’s Harry Vazquez provided a counterpoint to Gonzalez’s emotional testimony. He spoke before the Judiciary Committee, which was taking testimony on a raft of bills related to juvenile justice and the death penalty.

Harry, who’s 14, described the upside of state programs that help youngsters straighten out their lives before they get into serious trouble. He said that he was running away from home and hanging out with the wrong crowd when he got referred to the Family Support Center in New Haven, one of four in the state that serve 39 of Connecticut’s 169 towns.

He testified against the bill that would postpone implementation of Raise the Age “because I think it would harm me and other kids like me.” He described going to the support center’s respite care program, where he learned coping skills. “I used to curse a lot at my mom, but I learned to go into my room to cool off and then sit down and talk to her. I learned to make better friends. I used to be angry but I’m not angry anymore.” He predicted that without the family support center he would have ended up in the custody of the Department of Children and Families. Click [">here for more.](#)



sarah%20bryer.JPG

At the news conference and later in the Judiciary Committee hearing, youth advocates urged lawmakers not to delay implementation of the law. Sarah Bryer (pictured), director of the National Juvenile Justice Network, came up from Washington, D.C., to say that Connecticut is a model for many other states because it has taken steps to improve juvenile programs and has “followed the science” in responding to explanations that

humans' brains aren't fully developed until at least the age of 21 by raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction. She urged lawmakers not to go back on that commitment.

Abby Anderson, executive director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance (pictured below) said the reason there's room in the juvenile system is, "We're doing a better job of catching kids and diverting them, so why don't we put these things into effect for the 16-and 17-year-olds too? The juvenile justice system has gotten better and there's room for more kids, while the adult system is overcrowded.



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To ease municipalities' concerns about the cost of implementation, Anderson said youth advocates compromised on allowing police to question 16- and 17-year-olds without their parents present if they first make a reasonable effort to reach the parents. Another compromise would allow police to release older teens on a promise to appear, so they wouldn't have to hold them in municipal facilities. Both these changes are incorporated into a separate bill that was also considered on Wednesday.

As one of only three states where 16-year-old offenders are still treated as adults, how can Connecticut be considered a leader? Anderson said that once the state raised the age, the other two states (New York and North Carolina) began considering taking the same steps. Plus, some of the ten states in which those 17 and up are considered adults are moving to make the cut off 18, and those that already have 18 as the dividing age between juveniles and adults are looking at ways to make it harder to transfer youths to adult court.

A compromise bill would treat 16-year-olds as juveniles on the original implementation date of the law, next January, while postponing bringing 17-year-olds into the juvenile system for one year. The Alliance officially opposes this bill, but their information sheet indicated the organization “would favor this over a complete delay until 2012.”