

September 25, 2018

To: Members of the House Law and Justice Committee
Subject: House Bills 4607, 4653, 4662, 4664, 4676, 4659, 4685, 4753

The National Association of Social Workers – Michigan Chapter strongly supports legislation to raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 18.

There are 27,000 social workers in Michigan who work with various populations, including children. As licensed health professionals, we know that a 17-year-old's brain is not fully developed. As part of normal child development, they are more likely to take risks, act impulsively, and are highly susceptible to the negative influences of peers. Though these age-related factors may contribute to youthful mistakes, 17-year-olds are much more amenable to rehabilitative programs and behavior modification than older adult offenders. Nonetheless, Michigan prohibits 17-year-olds from accessing youth-focused treatment found only in the juvenile system.

In the adult system, these children are very likely to experience physical and sexual assault and other trauma that can lead to psychological damage, such as PTSD. Alternatively, Michigan's juvenile justice system is highly effective at delivering developmentally appropriate services and sanctions that hold youth accountable, engage the whole family in treatment, keep kids in school, and reduce reoffending. With adequate funding and resources, Michigan's juvenile justice system has the ability to absorb and provide far better treatment to 17-year-olds currently prosecuted in the adult justice system, saving money and lives in the long run.

In nearly all aspects of law, Michigan recognizes 18 as the age of adulthood. Seventeen-year-olds cannot vote, legally sign a contract, or purchase tobacco, fireworks or lottery tickets, and are still considered children for whom the state's child welfare system must protect from abuse and neglect.

Michigan is one of 4 remaining states that automatically prosecute 17-year-olds as adults for any offense. Several states have recently increased their age of juvenile jurisdiction, citing research, public safety, and cost-savings as the reason for the change. Those states found that "Raise the Age" has proven to be good fiscal policy. Now is the time for Michigan to join the 46 other states already recognizing that 17-year-olds who come in contact with the justice system are still children.

For the reasons stated above, we strongly support the proposed legislation to raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 18.

Sincerely,

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