Michigan's Children

Public policy in the best interest of children

Date: September 25, 2018

To: Michigan House Law and Justice Committee

From: Matt Gillard, President & CEO
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Re: Raise the Age Legislation Package

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the package of bills known as "Raise the Age". Michigan's Children is the only statewide and independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children and youth, from cradle to career, and their families, with a focus on policy solutions that improve equitable outcomes for children.

Most arrested 17-year-olds are charged with first-time, non-violent offenses, like minor in possession of alcohol, shoplifting, vandalism, and disorderly conduct. The majority of justice-involved youth have experienced abuse, neglect, foster care, mental health needs or have developmental disabilities, but with guidance and support, youth have an incredible capacity for rehabilitation and change. The juvenile justice system is best-suited to work with these young people, providing age-appropriate rehabilitative services, keeping kids in school, and engaging the whole family into the treatment process. Juvenile courts have stronger partnerships with children's mental health agencies, and can access Medicaid dollars to provide services to youth with mental health needs. However, the age of Michigan's juvenile court jurisdiction cuts off at 16, meaning that 17-year-old offenders must be automatically tried as adults and are unable to receive juvenile services.

17-year-olds must navigate Michigan's adult correctional policies, which unfortunately are not set up to help young people learn from and overcome their mistakes. An adult felony conviction can be disastrous to one's future prospects – a Michigan seventeen-year-old who offends the same day as a 17-year-old in Indiana, Ohio, or Illinois will average 40 percent less in lifetime earnings than youth from other states, increasing the likelihood of reliance on government assistance. A missed parole obligation for a non-violent offense can quickly snowball into a much larger problem, which is not always the most constructive response when working with youth.

Adult prisons and jails are also harmful to kids. Youth who are sentenced to jail or prison are more likely to be physically attacked, sexually assaulted, and to attempt suicide than youth in the juvenile justice system. Rather than teaching youth how to become productive adults, the trauma and violence experienced in adult facilities hardens them and makes them more likely to reoffend when released, adding further costs to the state in lost economic productivity and in need for other services.

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We must Raise the Age of juvenile court jurisdiction to allow prosecutors to decide to enroll 17-year-olds into juvenile justice programs on account of the rehabilitative benefits of juvenile justice for both the youth themselves and for society. Other states that raised the age have saved money and seen a decrease in youth reoffending and judicial caseloads. Investment now in juvenile justice programs will mean long-term decreased costs in state correctional, educational, and human services spending.

All other state laws establish the age of adulthood at 18, recognizing that children younger than 18 are not yet mature enough to vote, enlist in the military, serve on a jury, sign a binding contract, or purchase alcohol. Yet, if they become in trouble with the law, even for a minor, non-violent offense, they are automatically prosecuted as an adult, face a possible prison sentence, and can have a lifelong conviction. It is time for us to Raise the Age for juvenile courts.

We appreciate your efforts and continued service to make Michigan a place where people want to raise their kids. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions. We look forward to continuing to work with you to improve the health of our children, youth, families, and our state.

Matthew Gillard

President and CEO

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