

## **Capitol Corner: Juvenile Justice Reform is Best for Kids**

*February 24, 2016* – Michigan is one of only nine states where 17-year-old offenders continue to be automatically tried, sentenced and incarcerated as adults. But a package of 21 bills that has cleared the House Judiciary Committee with unanimous and bi-partisan support would reverse this archaic policy and spare the vast majority of 17 year olds from the adult corrections system. Instead, they would be adjudicated in the juvenile justice system where community-based supports exist to help them build a successful future. It is extremely encouraging that the “tough on crime” mentality is no longer seen as the only viable political option for conservative lawmakers in Michigan.

There's no doubt 17 year olds are better served in a juvenile court system, where the philosophy is rehabilitation and treatment rather than punishment. The vast majority of 17 year olds who end up in adult prisons are there for nonviolent offenses. They and the community would be better served if they received support to continue moving ahead toward a high school diploma, working toward college or a career path, and learning how to develop healthy relationships to support them. The [Raise the Age](#) discussion before the state Legislature is a step in the right direction but must be followed by significant investments in treatments and services that are good for kids, families and communities.

Along with bolstering the juvenile justice system, including prevention and diversion programs, we also need to take a broader view by strengthening cradle-to-career educational programs that prevent youths from heading into trouble in the first place. Expanded learning programs before and after school and in the summer have been proven to help children and youth succeed in school, find career paths and avoid delinquency. Second- and third-chance programs through alternative, adult and community education keep youths moving ahead in spite of setbacks. All of these programs need to serve children, youth and families informed by the trauma that many have experienced. We need to continue to invest in programs that bolster youths in pursuits that lead to a brighter future.

To do what's best for kids, the Legislature must pass the current package of bills and resolve to continue to make improvements in the juvenile justice system and investments in programs that keep kids out of it. HB 4947-4966 are expected to be taken up by the full House in the next couple of weeks before heading to the Senate. There is momentum in favor of the changes. Let's seize on that and push lawmakers even further by demanding they commit to improve systems that help kids truly move ahead.

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