

Testimony of Drew Williams submitted to

The DC Council Human Services and Public Safety and the Judiciary Committees

Hearing on Bill 17-913  
The Juvenile Justice Improvement Amendment Act Of 2008

October 20, 2008

Good morning. My name is Drew Williams. I am 22 years old. I want to thank you for this opportunity to come before you and tell you about my personal experience.

When I was 17 years old, I was arrested and charged as an adult. I had never been arrested before and I couldn't believe it when they took me to the DC jail. I was extremely scared when I arrived. That first day, I waited for a very long time to be processed. The whole time I was looking at these grown men and hearing what they were talking about and it scared me. I was only 17 years old and when it was my turn the C.O.'s asked me to strip down in front of everybody. It was humiliating.

The only thought in my mind that day was that I was in an adult jail and I'd better protect myself. When you think of the DC Jail, you just *know* bad things are going to happen.

Going to my cell was crazy. The place was so cold, and I don't mean the temperature. From the moment I got there, my mind changed. I was locked behind bars and at that moment, I felt that my mind locked up too. I didn't know what to expect. All I knew is that this didn't look like a place for kids. The jail was so dirty.

There were violent fights nearly every day. The inmates constantly stole things from each other. People took your shoes, your food, even your clean underwear. Fights would break out in the cells, and by the time the C.O.'s knew what was happening, the damage had been done. Rarely did fights get broken up.

I could never let my guard down. In the unit where we were housed, we were separated by glass from the adult inmates. So they were always watching us. I was always scared, but I couldn't show it because I knew that if I did, someone would take advantage of me.

Soon each day became like the one before. When we were allowed to come out of our cells, the only thing to do was to play cards. There was no school. Once a week, I went to the Free Minds Book Club, where I started to read books and write poetry. This program was once a week and I began to get excited about my education. But that was the *only* program. And after I turned 18, I wasn't even allowed to attend Book Club anymore.

All I focused upon was going home. But then they moved my court date back. At that point, I lost hope. I was at the DC Jail for seven months.

Most often, the kids who turned 18 at the DC Jail were transferred immediately to federal prison. I was very lucky, because instead, I was sent to the Ethan Allen School, a juvenile facility in Wisconsin. The Ethan Allen School had classes to meet the needs of all reading and math levels. We not only had school, but we learned trades. I took classes in barbering. I even had my own job where I earned a wage. I was on the school's basketball team. Having access to all of these programs changed my outlook. In DC, I had dropped out of school. It was like I was getting a second chance. I suddenly believed I could become something in life and I wanted to pursue my education.

In January 2006, I received my GED. I believe this happened only because I was sent to a facility with all of these great opportunities. If I had gone straight from the DC Jail to federal prison, I believe I would have just learned how to become a better criminal. I would probably have been in and out of jail for a very long time.

Instead, because I had been sent to a juvenile facility, when I was released in July 2006, I got a fulltime job. I worked at FedEx Field, and also at a DC restaurant. As soon as I could afford it, I enrolled in barber school. I graduated last month. I am now working fulltime as a barber. After I take my exams, I expect to have my barber's license by early next year. My next step will be to attend college and obtain a business degree so that I can achieve my dream of opening my own barbershop.

I wanted to share this story with you today because I don't believe the DC Jail is any place for kids. There is nothing there for them. Going to the Jail only keeps young people in a criminal mindset. They need to learn something new and different so they can see that there's a way to be successful without selling drugs.

At the DC Jail, all you see and learn is crime. I hope that you will seriously consider this legislation so that our young people who are now on the wrong path can change and receive an education.

You don't help a juvenile become a man by putting him in the adult system.

Thank you for your time.