

Age Raised

BY MELINDA TUHUS | JULY 9, 2007 3:40 AM | [PERMALINK](#) | [COMMENTS \(9\)](#)



Melinda Tuhus File Photo

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Toni Walker's **years-long crusade** has paid off, with passage of a state law that will stop sending teens under 18 to adult prisons.

Anyone who's been following the **efforts** of **Walker**, a New Haven state representative, New Haven State Sen. Toni Harp and others knows that Connecticut is one of just three states in the country that incarcerates 16- and 17-year-olds in adult prisons, with adult offenders. But not everyone knows that, according to Walker, the state Department of Corrections has estimated that only 3 percent of these young people are dangerous.

"They're borderline and end up falling on the wrong side of the system," said Walker, who's a social worker as well as a legislator. She said they need to get help on "the right side" rather than be treated like criminals, as they are under the current system.

The General Assembly passed the Raise the Age bill to move those young people back under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system. Gov. Jodi Rell threatened to veto it unless a budget to accommodate the necessary changes (estimated at \$100 million) accompanied the bill. But then she agreed to sign it after all, just pushing the effective date off six months to 2010. (More on that below.)

That was one victory in a session that saw a mixed record for the criminal-justice reform agenda.

[Click here](#) to read a round-up.

"Holding kids accountable is an important component of rehabilitation," Walker said after the "Raise the Age" bill was signed. "There are still penalties in place for kids who commit crimes. But we will hold them accountable in a setting that's designed to improve their behavior rather than exacerbate it. Sending kids to adult prisons is a great way to create adult criminals. Connecticut is now out of that business."

Walker's been in the General Assembly for five years, and has been working on this issue for much of that time. She and Harp co-chair the Juvenile Justice Planning and Implementation Committee (JJPIC), which looked at the number of kids involved in the system and the best services being offered around the country, and brought those people in to testify before the legislature about best practices.

One result is the creation of Family Service Centers under the new law. Under the current system, kids who are truant, or runaways, or hard to handle in other ways, but who have not broken any

laws, are often shuttled into the criminal justice system because there's no other place for them. The new family centers will offer parents who are at their wits' end 24-hour respite services, and individual and family therapy.

Walker added that there needs to be closer collaboration between the juvenile justice system and the school system. "Almost every child in the correctional system has been suspended from school at least once," she said, yet there's almost no communication between the two institutions.

Walker said the \$100 million estimated cost of putting 16- and 17-year-olds back in the juvenile system "is extremely misleading." She said it came from the Department of Children and Families (with input from other state agencies). "Their predictions were if no children were turned out of the system and we just changed the age, then that would be the cost. But with the changes we are planning through the courts and through probation, the number of kids will be dramatically reduced by two-thirds. DCF seemed to think they would have 300-400 children going through the system, but we predict 120 [16- and 17-year-olds]." That's in addition to the 9,000 to 10,000 other kids who go through the juvenile justice system annually.

Advocates of Raise the Age noted that the state's chief administrative judge strongly supported the bill, along with the commissioner of the Department of Correction.

DCF also put in costs for building more buildings -- local, smaller, better versions of the much-maligned Connecticut Juvenile Training School. Walker said that also contributes to the over-estimation of costs; she's convinced the total number of youth who would go to such facilities is much smaller than previous estimates. She said the planning committee estimates the costs at about \$35 million.

A Rell spokesman echoed Walker's long-term economic argument: "Studies have shown that children who do time in adult jails are more likely to commit more violent crime than youthful offenders who are handled by the juvenile system. So the governor feels this new law is not only humane, but it also should save taxpayers in the long run by diverting vulnerable youth from criminal paths."

Comments

POSTED BY: FRANK IEZZI | JULY 9, 2007 6:04 AM

Another significant change to the handling of criminals in which the general public has no awareness, input or influence as to the proceedings or outcome. Just a couple of do-gooders who think that these perps were just innocent children who made a bad choice that day,

Any 16 or 17 yr old charged as an adult was handled in that fashion for a reason. We're talking street-hardened thugs who commit brutal crimes and not children who shoplift a bar of candy. Keeping them in a juvenile system with a wrist slap for punishment just places the welfare of the community needlessly at risk. I'd like Ms, Walker to explain her actions to the family of that "kids" next victim.

POSTED BY: DOUG | JULY 9, 2007 8:04 AM

Congrats to Rep. Walker for pushing this through... clearly the idea is not to have youth come out of prison as harder criminals than when they went in...



POSTED BY: [CEDARHILLRESIDENT](#) | JULY 9, 2007 8:38 AM

Toni...

Thank You

We were just talking about this the other day. And your dedication to this bill.

My god the thought that these kids were in general population could make anyone cry.

To make children that are neglected into criminals??? MY GOODNESS!!

To help the parents of troubled children BRAVO!

And even the ones that have committed crime, they may not be saved but they are still at an age where they can be. To put them in a place where they learn how to be better criminals, where they learn to be angrier than life has already made them.

POSTED BY: CHARLIE | JULY 9, 2007 10:20 AM

Great idea. However, I hope the "dangerous" ones include anyone caught carrying a gun and anyone convicted of a robbery or any other crime against another person. I hope those ones are not only locked up with adults, but are locked up for 50 years with no parole. Send them to the dungeon and throw the keys into Long Island Sound. That would stop violent crime. Treating violent animals like kings and letting them out after a couple years is a guarantee violent crime in our community will continue.

POSTED BY: COLIN | JULY 9, 2007 11:14 AM

When a 16-year-old is sent to an adult prison, who are they around? Criminals?

What do you think they're going to learn from criminals? Crime.

These juvenile facilities are not just a slap on the wrist. They are intense and, with the right funding and oversight, focused on making sure kids remain kids until they grow up instead of sending them on a fast track to lifelong criminality. Status crime offenders (i.e. truancy, underage drinking, runaways) are not going to benefit from being thrown in with thieves and murderers. These kids need accountability and assertive treatment to keep them in school and in the community where they belong. If they re-offend, then it's off to juvie. Keep in mind that the majority of juvenile offenders are not rapists and murderers, and those that are will be dealt with as such.

Also keep in mind that this won't be 100% effective. Nothing is. But even if only 50% of the kids in this program go on to lead a crime-free life, that's still 20% better than their chances after a stint in general population.

POSTED BY: DARNELLG | JULY 9, 2007 12:11 PM

Toni,

great job and determination. We need to work with these kids as long as possible. The hopelessness they suffer fuels the bad actions they commit. I hope you now turn to the school system and its failures (low test rates, high drop out rates), increasing the ability of graduates to attend college by both lowering tuition rates and increasing scholarships, as well as providing more funding for afterschool and summer programs.

POSTED BY: REDSCARE | JULY 9, 2007 1:45 PM

Frank: The "raise the age" agenda has been ongoing for years with significant press coverage. The bill was proposed in 2006 legislative session. This year it passed. If you indeed "had no awareness, input or influence as to the proceedings or outcome," that is your own fault for not paying attention to an issue that you apparently feel so strongly about. Had you done so, perhaps you could have driven to Hartford and been one of few people who objected.

If you're concerned about hardened "thug-like" juveniles, you must not have read the bill, because such offenders will still be prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system.

And finally, currently (and until 2010), ALL 16 and 17 years who are arrested in Connecticut are handled in the adult criminal justice system. The police do not have the discretion to charge someone as an adult or a juvenile, as you suggest. So, yes, today, a sixteen year-old who steals a candy bar does, in fact, get prosecuted in the same courthouse and sent to the same prison (if at all), for the

offender who shoots and kills. If your kid was the one stealing the candy bar, would you want him sharing a cell with the kid who just shot dead your neighbor?

POSTED BY: LINDY LEE GOLD | JULY 9, 2007 2:07 PM

Toni Walker has a demonstrated commitment to the youth of our state and the ability to collaborate with her colleagues to accomplish her goals.

Very few pieces of legislation have the potential to save lives. This achievement elevates all of us. Thanks to Toni and all of our supportive delegation for bringing about such positive changes to a barbaric system!

POSTED BY: KAMB | JULY 10, 2007 6:52 AM

Oh boy, what a dumb idea. Then you wonder why crime is out of control. The whole idea of having laws and obeying them is the balancing act of deterrence. The deterrence of being caught and sent to a place that is horrible is a pretty good way to stop people from committing crimes. Now we can send these gun toting, murderers to day camp. THANKS FOR THE LIBERAL SOLUTION TONI!

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