

Honorable Joseph M. Shortall, Chair
Connecticut Sentencing Commission
450 Capitol Avenue Hartford, CT 06106

RE: Juvenile Sentence Reconsideration

November 29, 2012

Dear Members of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission:

As the Provincial of the New England Province of the Society of Jesus, I submit this testimony to urge you to support legislation to provide a “second look” at long sentences imposed on youth. The New England Province is one of nine U.S. regions of the Society of Jesus or Jesuits, a Catholic religious order of priests and brothers serving the Church in educational, pastoral and spiritual ministries. Jesuits of the New England Province serve as teachers, campus ministers and administrators at universities, high schools, and Nativity middle schools, including Fairfield Preparatory School and Fairfield University in the state of Connecticut. We also serve in parishes and as chaplains in hospitals, prisons and the military.

I write today on behalf of the Province to ask the Connecticut Sentencing Commission to recommend legislation to allow a person sentenced to a lengthy term of imprisonment for a crime committed under the age of eighteen to seek release under parole supervision after serving a portion of the sentence. Such a recommendation from the Commission is an important step towards ensuring that all youth are held accountable for their actions in an age-appropriate manner.

In Bridgeport and New Haven, Connecticut, our students at Fairfield Prep and Fairfield University work alongside community partners with low-income youth in the classroom and after school tutoring and mentoring programs. Our faculty members are engaged in research on juvenile justice reform. Our staff members are actively involved with community organizations like RYASAP and the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance working to codify appropriate sentencing guidelines for court involved youth and help juvenile offenders return to our communities. Through these interactions, we are well aware of the challenges facing inner-city youth in Connecticut, realities that result in some young adults serving time in detention. However, we also know the capacity of these same youth for growth, change and reconciliation.

As the Commission considers possible “second look” provisions, we urge members to consider well-established scientific evidence that proves the fundamental differences between youth and adults. Recent research shows that children do not have adult levels of judgment, impulse control, or ability to assess risks, and we know that they are more susceptible than adults to negative influences and outside pressures, including peer pressure. These relevant factors, including the unique potential that youth have for change and rehabilitation, demonstrate the importance of providing youth convicted of serious crimes meaningful and frequent sentencing reviews after a portion of their time is served.

The New England Province of the Society of Jesus supports special rules regarding the eligibility of youth for parole release as sound public policy that promotes accountability and keeps communities safe. Meaningful "second look" provisions do not allow for the premature release of inmates serving time in prison for serious offenses. Instead, they ensure that youth convicted of serious crimes have the chance to work towards release if they can prove, later in life, they have been rehabilitated.

We appreciate the Commission's consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Myles N. Sheehan S.J.", written in a cursive style.

V. Rev. Myles N. Sheehan, S.J.
Provincial