

Proponent Testimony

S.B. 256

Greetings Chair Lang, Vice-Chair Plummer and Ranking Member Leland and Members of the House Criminal Justice Committee:

I truly appreciate the opportunity to write to you, regarding a very important issue that is before you today. I want to offer written testimony on behalf of Senate Bill 256 regarding juvenile sentences. And offer a few words about my experience. And why I support this bill. It is an extremely important issue that I believe whole-heartedly needs to happen. I am not an advocate. My loved one was incarcerated as a Juvenile. And by the time he can see the parole board again will have been incarcerated in your great state for nearly 30 years. He has spent more time in prison then what he has in the outside world. He was incarcerated at 16 years old. For a terrible event that he was part of.

I would be remiss to say that he has not allowed that event to define who he is as a person. And has taken every opportunity at his disposal to better himself. Could you imagine you or one of your children being a part of something that puts you in prison for the rest of your life? How would you feel if it was your child at 16 that you would no longer see outside of prison walls?

I can't offer you extensive and elaborate words in regards, to the importance of the passing of this bill. But I fully support the changes that are proposed in Senate bill 256 that is now in front of you. As a private citizen I have interest in this topic and believe that Ohio is lagging behind the other states that have already passed legislation regarding juvenile life without parole or juvenile indefinite sentencing. I felt a calling after meeting my loved one nearly 4 years ago to be as involved as much as I possibly could when it came to this issue in front of you today.

Chris and I met nearly 4 years ago. And as a victim of crime myself when I was 16 years of age, I believe that not only do I have the insight of how a teenager thinks but also one that has been directly affected by a crime. When I first met Chris and even contemplated on whether this was a situation that I wanted to get involved in, I really didn't know how I would react to being around people that have committed a crime since I myself was a victim at 16 to a sexually motivated crime. I never in a million years would have thought that I would be so invested in someone that was incarcerated and that I would ever visit a prison or, encounter someone that was in prison. But over the course of a few months of writing and getting to know Chris. I was impressed with the person that he is. I found myself not being concerned with visiting a prison or an inmate. As time passed, I was increasingly amazed by how much he has accomplished while being incarcerated and the kind of person, he is. In his years of being incarcerated he has grown and developed into an amazing individual and even though those that are incarcerated are looked down upon he has chosen to elevate himself by not only doing over 80,000 hours of community service. He has also received his Associate Degree and bachelor's degree in the last 4 years. He has been involved with the ASPO organization painting wheelchairs for the physically challenged. And those are just a few of his accomplishments.

I fully support these changes in this legislation in front of you. As I do not believe that any child should receive an indefinite sentence. We don't allow anyone under the age of 18 to vote, under the age of 21 to buy alcohol or cigarettes because they are just that children. So why are we so easily able to throw a 16-year-old in prison for the rest of their life. Chris received a life sentence with the possibility of parole when he was 16 years old. He had to grow up in a prison environment. Has spent most of his life in a prison. He has never had a driver's license or ever had the opportunity to prove what an exceptional individual he has become. When he has been seen by the parole board, he has been denied 3 times, for various reasons. At what point do we give those people that are in prison and have been since a young age the opportunity to prove that they can become a productive member of society. In no way do I fear Chris. Chris would not hurt anyone ever again. But at the age of 16 all too often we take part in things and do not realize the risks of our actions or the consequences that may come with it. If it wasn't for my parenting, I could very well have been one of those individuals that spent their life in prison. As children we do not understand how our actions can affect ourselves or another individual. I personally was making poor choices even into my late twenties. So how can we as a society, deem that a juvenile is fully aware of their actions and the consequences and send them to prison for the rest of their lives? How can we throw our youth away? How can we possibly justify that they should be in prison for the rest of their lives? They have not had the chance to develop into productive members of society. And when they do see the parole board, they don't have any representation. The parole board does not take their age at the time of the crime, the home environment, or their maturity level into consideration. Instead they continue to give them fops time after time with what reasoning? If they break a rule whether it is using the wrong set of stairs or something more serious the parole board sees that and uses it as an excuse to give them another flop so they have no chance to prove themselves in the outside world. So, in essence, they keep getting punished over and over. 30 years let that sink in for a minute. If you were put in prison at 16 and spent 30 years in prison with no end in sight no matter what you did to improve yourself how would you feel? Would you feel as though there was no hope?

You have individual's like Chris who should have been given a parole his last time in front of the board that do not get fair hearings. And as juvenile lifer's they have no recourse whatsoever. Do you realize what that does to someone that desperately wants to come home? That has done everything that was asked of them and still they are told that they are not suitable for release. Well how much more does that person have to do to be suitable when there is no longer any other programs that they can take to be considered suitable for release because they have already completed them all and have done everything they could to better themselves. I can tell you firsthand what happens, because I have been impacted by it. They give up hope that they will ever see the outside world. As I said Chris should have been released his last hearing. After all the community service that he had done. Receiving all the education he could possibly receive while incarcerated, he was denied. Given yet another 3-year flop. He has been flopped 13 years over his minimum sentence. And maybe he wasn't ready to be released at his first parole hearing. That I can not speak on because I did not know him at the time. But I can tell you he was definitely ready this last one and he should have been released. He is the most caring and compassionate man I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. And yes, I say pleasure. And it is my honor to be his girlfriend because he is more than just his worst mistake. If he hasn't let his crime define who he is as a person then why does the justice system define him on his worst act. No amount of programming done, or development over the years of incarceration are taken into account when these juvenile's see the parole board. That is why it is so important that Senate Bill 256 passes. So no longer can children be put in prison and the key thrown away. Leaving it up to people that only look at their worst act and decide from that if they should be released. I have a son in his mid twenties and I can only imagine the anguish I would feel if he had made a grievous mistake at the age of 16 and I already had to see him in an adult prison for 6 years. I never thought that I would ever be impacted with a situation in

my life that would put me in contact with someone in prison. But I have to say that this experience has opened my eyes as an individual to the plight of those that have been incarcerated as children.

If prison is supposed to be a place of rehabilitation, then how is keeping someone in prison after they have done everything, they can possibly do to improve themselves as an individual rehabilitation? At that time, it becomes a punitive system. Everything that I have read about the Ohio prison system and parole reform says that the worst of the worst are the only ones that are not paroled. But this just isn't the truth. You have many old law juveniles' in prison that have been there for decades that learned from their worst mistake, who would never hurt another person. Yes, there are individuals that should be excluded from being able to benefit from this legislation but that has been outlined in it. But for those that made a terrible mistake that are remorseful and have bettered themselves during their time incarcerated how can we just sit idly by and not give them a chance to prove themselves. They live with what they were a part of every day. Year after year, denial after denial. And all hope is taken away after each denial. It instills the mentality of it doesn't matter what I do they aren't going to let me out. I can tell you from experience after this last parole hearing just how distraught and broken Chris felt. It truly broke my heart to hear all the hope that he had of coming home taken out of him. Not to mention how much it devastated me. I wasn't planning on getting into a relationship with a prisoner but that is the path that my life took me. And that is one thing I will never regret. He amazes me, on a daily basis on the kind of individual he is. For him to become this amazing man while living in such a dark place absolutely astonishes me. I have spent three years of visiting; I know that doesn't seem as though it is a lot. But I have already gone through one parole hearing and the nerves of preparing for it and then the wait to hear a decision and then the devastation that comes with a denial. I have definitely experienced enough in the last three years to convince me that laws need to change when it comes to adult's that were convicted as juvenile's because not only could they not grasp the risks and consequences of their actions but also had no grasp of the legal system at the time of their worst act. And to prevent another child of getting a life without parole eligibility again. The system has failed these individuals horribly. It is time for change.

So, in closing, I implore all of you on the Criminal Justice committee to pass Senate Bill 256. To put yourself in the shoes of not only the families and friends of the individuals that would benefit from this legislation. But also, in the shoes of the ones that are incarcerated at this time that were juvenile's when they were incarcerated. We are in desperate need for change. No child should face a lifetime in prison. This legislation needs to be enacted so that we make sure that our children do not continue to suffer the injustice of being sentenced to life without parole. Or a life sentence where a parole board just keeps denying them a chance to prove that they have changed. Like what is happening daily. It is time that Ohio catches up with the rest of the states and the Supreme Court of the United States that deemed that it is unconstitutional to sentence a juvenile to life in prison without the possibility of parole. The United States is the only nation in the world that sentences juveniles to life in prison without the eligibility of parole. How is this even possible? How is it that the entire world knows that a child should not spend their entire life in prison, but we do not? It is with great respect and honor to be able to submit my proponent testimony to the Criminal Justice Committee today in complete support of the passage of Senate Bill 256.

My highest regards,
Jacqueline Goodsite