

Testimony in **Support** of **S. B. 256**
Regards sentencing offenders under 18 when committed offense
Senate Judiciary Committee

Good afternoon, to all members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for allowing this opportunity to submit written testimony for Senate Bill 256. My name is Teresa L. Cody-Hannah. I support Senate Bill 256, because I believe this statement from Amnesty International “However serious the crime, children, who are still developing physically, mentally and emotionally, do not have the same level of culpability as adults and require special treatment in the criminal justice system appropriate to their youth and immaturity. Children can and do commit terrible crimes. When they do, they should be held accountable, but in a manner that reflects their special capacity for rehabilitation.”

Please, let me introduce myself, I am a mother whose son went to prison for five years. During those five years I began very involved within the prison system starting support groups for family members of the incarcerated and leading some of those groups, becoming a volunteer for the Kairos program and Opening Doors programs. I had also been appointed to the Ohio Dept. of Rehabilitation’s Family Council serving as a volunteer for ODRC attending conferences as a speaker on family issues regarding incarceration. I still participate in the Kairos Outside program as a volunteer and am also teaching yoga to juvenile offenders at the Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility in Cleveland. I have been working for the last 25 plus years as an IT professional and before that I was a Police dispatcher. I have raised five children and have six grandchildren. I say all of that, so you know, I have a lot of life experience with children and continue supporting those touched by incarceration even though it has now been 12 plus years since my son has come home.

So, why I have submitted this testimony today is to speak on behalf of a man I meet along the way during those prison efforts. His name is Christopher Ferrell A272486. He committed crimes at the age of 16 and before the age of 18 he sentenced to prison back in 1993. Chris Ferrell is now 45 years of age. I came to know Chris when my son went to prison at the age of 21. I began very distort and prayed that somehow he could find a way to stay safe inside those prison walls. Inside he meet Chris Ferrell. I would go see him every two weeks on many days he often tell me stories about Chris. Finally, I began visiting with both of them at times. Chris Ferrell took my son under his wing and helped him to stay out of trouble, he helped me in encouraging him to attend college and get involved in programing to keep his mind active. Chris even took classes with him. Chris Ferrell helped me in my volunteer efforts since he is an artist, he made banners and signage. He helped in making my son a great man. Today I can say my son is a hard worker, a great father and he just purchased his two houses in these years he has been home. I could not be prouder of him ... even though he went to prison. **I believe in my heart it is because of Christopher Ferrell he found his way to a second chance.** My son is not the only one either, I know of six other men that thank Chris for helping them, too! My son and other men write and visit Chris still – because of all he did for them. I do not know the stats on this fact because they are not available– But, I am certain that the percentage of previous inmates that go back into a prison to visit someone that is very small! My son and I still go back to visit Christopher Ferrell often to say thank you again and so do others!

Christopher Ferrell has completed over 81,000 recorded hours of community services effort mostly in art since **he is such a gifted artist.** He obtained GED his first year in prison and he has now has obtained a bachelor's degree, too. For the most part he has stayed out of trouble. That is something that I am certain a very, very low percentage people can say that have been in prison for twenty-eight plus years.

I believe many of the juveniles within in our prison system like Christopher Ferrell deserve to be given that second look and possible chance if they have proven themselves and

can be welcomed back into society. Christ Ferrell has proven himself over and over and I know he will meet all and any criteria you set up if only given that chance! SB256 states the parole board is required to provide the person “a meaningful opportunity for release” (arguably, something Chris hasn’t yet had in a meaningful way). The board must consider youth-related mitigating factors, like the person’s young age at the offense, their youthful immaturity, family/home life at the time, subsequent growth and maturity. I have been at all of his three prior parole hearings in the last 15 years. We all know that a child’s reasoning abilities are limited and based more in fantasy than in a reality based on previous life experiences.

My son Adam, my husband and I all call Chris a friend. I have also called him a God sent, I will forever be indebted to him and that is why my husband and I will be welcoming Chris Ferrell into our home **whenever he is released**. This is my attempt to help our justice system heal and my attempt to give back to this man Christopher Ferrell that has helped my family so much. I am certain there are many possibilities in other teenage lifers have the potential to lead productive lives within our communities. Chris is the prime example of what is possible that can be done with a life even though you are in prison! If other have proven themselves on the inside like Chris has and if they have matured into responsible adults- even though they are in there – How can we not give them that second chance!! All we have to do is give them a second look and that possibility for that second chance.

Thank you for your time and efforts,

Teresa L Cody-Hannah

Amnesty International Demand Juvenile Justice

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/children-s-rights/juvenile-life-without-parole>