

Testimony by Karen Jackson for House Judiciary Committee Meeting 5/9/23

Thank you, madam chair, and committee members for making time for my testimony here today in opposition to the House bills 4160-4164 concerning Juvenile Life Without Parole JL-WOP.

My name is Karen Jackson. I am a co-victim of murder. My son, Jeffrey Ballor, and his female friend, Kristen Pangman, were brutally stabbed to death in a double homicide in 2017. I speak here for myself, my family and for other co-victims who belong to a group I manage called Voices of Murder Victims.

There is little time here to properly convey the depth, severity, and longevity of the trauma we co-victims experience, so I am also providing the clerk with my written essay on my personal story to share with you.

Even with limited time, I would like to recognize our innocent loved ones who were killed brutally and savagely. These victims no longer have a voice or a say in your proposals and decision making. That is left up to us, the co-victims.

As co-victims, under the most agonizing of times, we are forced to seek justice for the deaths of our loved ones while picking up the pieces of our own lives and holding together what remains of our broken families.

The trauma caused by losing a loved one in such a brutal manner leaves us with a host of issues. One of the most pronounced and the one that I wish to point out today is the lifelong impact on our mental health. I know of no co-victim that isn't affected in some way with mental disorders like PTSD, anxiety, depression, and fear. A killer doesn't just take lives, they destroy the ability of whole families to function in healthy, productive ways.

The Supreme Court decisions concerning JL-WOP have come as a huge blow to what we co-victims recognized as justice. Our assurance that we would never have to fear for our safety, that of our families and the public has been taken away.

Further adding to our trauma is the introduction of these bills. We feel they lean to the side of leniency for the guilty juvenile murderer while disregarding the impact on innocent co-victims.

We oppose legislation that repeals MCL 769.25 & 769.25a and sets incarceration at a set term of 10 to 60 years. A killer having already served more than 10 years of a sentence would be eligible for parole review and subsequent immediate release if approved.

We reject any notion that a parole board could deem a killer to be rehabilitated to live in society as justification for reduced sentencing. We do not believe a parole board assessment of the behavior of the killer over a period of years in a closed, regulated environment will guarantee that those behavioral changes will hold true outside of prison.

We oppose legislation that removes all possibilities of JL-WOP and removes all options to evaluate each case based on its own merits.

Although we must respect the Supreme Court's decision, we do not support any legislation that goes beyond what is necessary to satisfy the Supreme Court's ruling.

We ask the committee to acknowledge the continued life struggles and especially the mental health of co-victims as paramount to raising our children and living productive and socially accountable lives.

We ask the committee to recognize the concerns of innocent co-victims above that of the guilty, juvenile murderer.

We ask the committee to oppose these bills.

Thank you.