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Support for HB4947-HB4965
Testimony on HB4959, HB 4966

Honorable House Criminal Justice Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of the entire Youth In Prison bill package HB 4947-HB4965. As the mother of a 15 year old with known mental illness, who wound up in this system, and on behalf of many of the other teens and their families I advocated for, I thank you for considering what is just, fair and smart for Michigan's youth going forward.

While I can speak about the personal experiences regarding many of these bills and why this legislation is necessary, I would like to speak specifically about placement of our youth in adult facilities and the use of segregation or solitary confinement of those youth.

We have been provided more than enough data and evidence-based research proving the lack of a youth's brain development, of the long-lasting effects of isolation and confinement on any individual, let alone our juveniles. Michigan has continued to turn a blind eye to the need for rehabilitation, protection and necessary programming for our youth sentenced into the adult system. Knowing all that I do from experiencing my son being placed in an adult jail and then into prison at age 15, and advocating for several of other youth in with him, I can tell you the adult system is not designed to care for or rehabilitate these juveniles. Many come in with mental health needs, or develop them after arrival. They are operating under adult policy and procedures, yet in regards to their medical and mental health care, they are not an adult until age 18 by law, as I learned through recipient rights once my son was inside.

Did you know there is no in-patient treatment for these youth at the prison where all youth must reside? The boys must be moved into the Woodland Correctional Facility, the psychiatric prison which is for the most mentally ill adult men. Currently I believe there are only a couple of girls under age 18 in the women's prison. Sight and sound barriers become very difficult to maintain in these settings. My son was kept isolated in a cell once at Woodland, yet he could hear and see everything that went on around him. We are expecting this system to do something they are not capable of or designed to do – to care for children and youth. The PTSD and trauma created will last a lifetime and be carried with them into our community.

We must make sure that every child's life matters, and determine that it is never okay to leave these children behind, forgotten and inadequately cared for in a system that is not set up to provide for them. I know this is difficult economically for counties to provide within the community. Michigan's leaders need to work together and look to other states to create a system that best serves these youth. One left behind is too many.

We should end the practice of putting any juvenile in the adult prison system until they are at least 18-21, as is the practice of numerous other states. Second, for those children currently in the system under 21, we must mandate age-appropriate programming and rehabilitation be provided and end the use of solitary confinement as we utilize it today. It can be done. One example is the COURAGE Program in Texas. www.tdcj.state.tx.us/divisions/rpd/rpd_courage.html In the end we all will win, because we must remember that how we treat these children inside will affect them and how they are when they return home.