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Support for HB 4947- 4965

The Hon. Kurt Heise, Chair, and Members
House Committee on Criminal Justice

Thank you for working to improve the way we treat our troubled teen-agers in Michigan and for the opportunity to submit testimony supporting this package of bills. We at Citizens for Prison Reform strongly support the legislation to raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 18 and to greatly minimize the use of solitary confinement.

Citizens for Prison Reform is an organization of families and friends of a loved one in prison. It teaches them how to navigate the Department of Corrections and try to get necessary treatment and programming for their family member. However, when that loved one is a juvenile, there are very few services available inside the prison or on the outside once the juvenile is released from prison. Family members must deal with the trauma and scars.

In recent years there has been a movement to develop "specialty" courts - mental health courts, veterans courts, and sobriety or drug courts. This state has supported and encourage these courts and they are generally considered successful. Ironically, at the same time Michigan acted to severely limit the first specialty court - Juvenile Court. Juvenile courts were established to deal with juveniles because it was recognized that they were not fully matured people. As part of normal development, they are more likely to take risks, act impulsively, and are highly susceptible the negative influences of peers. Though these age-related factors may contribute to youthful mistakes, 17-year-olds are much more amenable to rehabilitative programs and behavior modification than older adult offenders. Michigan's juvenile courts are very effective in providing critical age-appropriate services including treatment for the entire family when appropriate. These services are simply not available in adult prisons.

All too often in adult prisons, juveniles are thrown into solitary confinement cells - either for discipline or for "protection." Either way it is punishment and punishment that causes long-lasting and sometimes permanent psychological damage and trauma. Solitary confinement is especially damaging for juveniles who have not developed the inner resources and life experiences to withstand it.

We urge you to support HBs 4947 - 4965 so that we can get our troubled young people out of the adult system and out of segregation so that they can receive the services they need to develop into positive, productive citizens of our state.