

## Raise the Age & Youth in Prison

Testimony offered by Brian Philson, President & CEO – Highfields, Inc. – 12/8/15

Good Morning. My name is Brian Philson and I am the President & CEO of Highfields, Inc. a human services non-profit agency serving 10 counties in mid-Michigan.

I am testifying today in support of "Raise the Age" and "Youth in Prison" legislation.

I have worked within Juvenile Justice in Michigan for the past 30 years. I served in Jackson County as a Circuit/Juvenile Court employee: working as a Youth Specialist, a Family Counselor and served for 15 years as the Director of the Jackson County Youth Center-supervising juvenile detention, juvenile treatment and community corrections programs. For the past 10 years I have served Highfields as their CEO and providing ultimate oversight to our community based and juvenile justice programs.

During my time in Juvenile Justice service I have served as the President of the Michigan Juvenile Detention Association, Vice-President of the National Juvenile Detention Association, am active in the National Partnership for Juvenile Services, and have trained or consulted in 25 states on Juvenile Justice issues. I have served as an expert witness and as a trainer for the National Institute of Corrections and for the Bureau of National Training and Technical Assistance (which is a training/technical assistance agency for the Office and Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.)

I was a Governor Engler appointee to the Michigan Committee on Juvenile Justice and was later re-appointed by Governor Granholm and I currently serve on the Michigan Board of Social Work as an appointee of Governor Snyder. I am an adjunct professor of Juvenile Justice at both Michigan State University and Siena Heights University. I also serve on the Lansing Community College Juvenile Justice advisory board and am the current president/chair of the Michigan Federation of Children and Families board of directors.

### **Why do I support HB 4947 – 4954; and 4956-4958?**

-Research has proven that youth incarceration actually increases violent crime.

-Research shows that 17 year olds are not adults. (We know that adolescent brain development is not complete until their early 20's. That is why in Michigan you need to be 18 to vote and 21 to buy alcohol.)

-If we are going to enact a significant shift in policy, now is the time to do it; as juvenile justice incarceration and adjudication rates are at all time lows, ensuring that there is capacity in our current juvenile justice programs. In addition, the last ten years has seen a significant movement toward community based programming in the juvenile justice system. This movement toward keeping youth in their communities has proven to be effective with better outcomes and a significant savings to both local and state budgets.

-Private/Public juvenile justice systems are well positioned to serve the 17 year olds that will move into the Juvenile Justice arena. I believe that there is capacity and the expertise to do so.

-Michigan laws in this area are outdated and I applaud the bill sponsors for the foresight to correct this.

-It makes economic sense; specifically that a youth in the juvenile justice system has a greater chance of becoming a tax-paying contributing citizen of Michigan, versus a released adult offender from the Department of Corrections. (Michigan recidivism rates support this.)

-I believe that we can "Raise the Age" while still prosecuting those severe juvenile offenders as adults. This would preserve the "public protection concern" and hold youth accountable for the most serious offenses.

-17 year olds will have a better chance of rehabilitation and treatment in the juvenile justice system than the adult system. The juvenile justice system is better equipped to handle the mental health and emotional challenges of these youth.

-I was asked recently if can we afford to make this change; and my response was "we can't afford not to." By this I mean that we are morally obligated to do so, we are economically obligated to do so and we owe it to the citizens of Michigan to find a way to make this happen.

-By this I believe that we need to "Raise the Age" while preserving accountability, preserving a process by which we can try the most serious offenses as adults and retaining the appropriate youth in the juvenile justice programs that can best serve them and the public interests.

Thank you for your combined leadership on this important issue.