

Dear Committee,

I am a professor of social work and researcher on youth justice. I strongly urge support of HB 1248.

Six child health professional societies – American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Council for School Social Work, American Psychological Association, Clinical Social Work Association, National Association of Social Workers, and Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine – recently endorsed a statement calling for a minimum age of least 12. *“On behalf of child and adolescent health professional organizations, we collectively endorse action to institute a minimum age of at least 12 years for juvenile justice system jurisdiction. Children and young adolescents who come in contact with the juvenile justice system need access to developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, supportive health and social services, not inappropriate punishment.”*

What is the rationale? They cite the lack of a minimum age in most U.S. states and note the advances in neuroscience that indicate childhood as a crucial time of brain development – a time at which children’s brains are developing, have normal immaturity, and are unlikely to benefit from or understand processing in the U.S. criminal legal system. They argue that “the juvenile justice system, as it functions today, does not align with a contemporary understanding of brain science.... When viewed through the lens of brain development, it is clear that society’s response to such behavior should be to provide children and young adolescents with developmentally appropriate health and social services and not to punish them by involving them with the juvenile justice system.”

The health professional organizations further note the pipeline of recidivism and long-term adverse health effects that childhood justice involvement can bring. Traumatic police involvement can shape young people's future thinking and wellbeing.

Instead, the health professionals call for addressing the root causes of children’s distress through health and social service agencies. Doing so can set kids on better trajectories and is more just. Restitution – holding kids accountable for their actions – can occur outside of court systems. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation coined, a courthouse is “no place for kids.”

These allied health professionals conclude that a minimum age of jurisdiction of at least 12 “is an important step toward a more developmentally appropriate justice system for young people and a healthier society for all” – and toward a goal of racial justice and health equity.

I urge you to lead Virginia in taking this important step of setting a minimum age of prosecution.

Sincerely,



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