

April 16, 2026

House Judiciary Committee

State of Rhode Island General Assembly

82 Smith Street, Providence, RI 02908

Dear Chairwoman McEntee and Members of the Committee,

We appreciate the chance to submit this written testimony in support of bill H7132. This proposed bill would amend existing state law to prohibit individuals 21 years old or younger from being sentenced to life without parole.

This bill is an important opportunity to reduce the public health impact of long-term and lifelong incarceration in our state. Nearly 15 years ago, the Supreme Court case *Miller v. Alabama* rightly recognized that life sentences without parole (LWOP) for juvenile offenders (<18 years of age) were unconstitutional.¹ However, limiting LWOP sentences for juvenile offenders does not go far enough to protect public health. Young adults (18-25 years old) are at a similar developmental stage and decision-making capacity as those in their late teens.² Yet, as of 2024 over 70,000 individuals in the United States currently serving life sentences were convicted of crimes committed before the age of 25.³

It has been well documented that incarceration negatively impacts mental health outcomes during a sentence and after release.⁴⁻⁸ Mood disorders such as Major Depressive Disorder and Bipolar Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and anxiety are particularly linked to incarceration and can lead to suicidal ideation.⁴⁻⁷ A key factor in determining the intensity and lasting impact of these disorders is the length of time an individual spends incarcerated.^{4,5} This is a particular concern for juvenile or young adult offenders, for whom the severity of mental health outcomes is correlated with the age of their first incarceration.⁹

Moreover, there is vast evidence showing that disparities in LWOP sentencing practices are pervasive. People of color, particularly people who identify as Black, face higher rates of LWOP sentences within the population.³ Overall, Black and Hispanic individuals are incarcerated at much higher rates than White individuals,¹⁰ often much earlier in life than other incarcerated individuals. This results in higher rates of depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and other mental health disorders throughout life.⁹

It is an international standard, supported by the World Health Organization and numerous human rights groups, that all prisoners be afforded the opportunity to demonstrate their rehabilitation with the goal of re-entering society.¹¹ Our state currently falls short of that standard. Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that young adults who endure lengthy prison sentences rarely re-offend once released.¹²

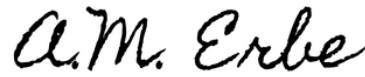
Considering what we know about human development as we age, the long-term mental health impacts of incarceration, and disparities within the justice system, we believe it is not prudent to punish individuals permanently for their actions prior to the age of 21. Particularly, we believe that no person, especially a young person, should live their entire life without a chance to showcase their rehabilitation and one day re-enter society. Finally, given the low risk of recidivism among this population, we believe that this legislation is a welcome and necessary, step to reform our justice system. It has our full support.

Sincerely,



Dr. Amy Nunn

Chief Executive Officer
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Max Erbe, MPH

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