



Legislative Testimony
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**Written Testimony Supporting
Senate Bill 318, An Act Establishing a Task Force
to Study Interventions for At-risk Youth**

Senator Moore, Senator Suzio, Representative Urban, and distinguished members of the Committee on Children:

My name is Kaley Lentini, and I am legal counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 318, An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study Interventions for At-risk Youth. As an organization committed to defending the rights of youth and students, the ACLU-CT supports the creation of a task force to study interventions for at-risk youth.

The ACLU-CT recommends that this task force explore a wide range of issues dealing with at-risk youth. We encourage the task force to include in its study school to prison pipeline issues, including issues of school resource officers in schools. We would also encourage that the study look at issues faced by detained youth; homeless youth, including LGBTQ homeless youth; youth of color; and youth with mental illnesses, disabilities, and substance use disorders.

It is imperative that the task force examine the harsh disciplinary policies that feed the school to prison pipeline and ways that state agencies can help youth from becoming a part of it. Students are arrested every day for misbehavior that could be handled inside schools. Children are charged with “crimes” for things such as throwing a paper airplane, kicking a trashcan, and wearing sagging pants. Schools referring students to law enforcement for such everyday misbehavior can change the course of students’ lives and send them down the wrong path without resources to succeed. There is a racial disparity in the school to prison pipeline, as students of color are more likely to be arrested in school. Though school arrest rates overall are declining in the state, students of color are more likely to be arrested in school than their white peers, according to a 2016 Center for Children’s Advocacy report.

In regard to detained youth, we encourage the task force to examine the needs of detained youth and how to best ensure that they are receiving the resources they need while they are detained. Another important

issue is successful reentry into society after youth are detained. Ensuring these youth receive what they need after returning to their communities is an important piece of making sure they are not caught up in the vicious cycle of recidivism. The ACLU-CT believes this is an important opportunity for the state to look at all vulnerable and marginalized populations, particularly those who are over-policed and over-represented in our juvenile justice system, to determine where our state is failing them and how our state can prevent them from entering the justice system in the first place.

Homeless youth, and LGBTQ homeless youth, in particular, are in need of help from state agencies to ensure their success in school and life. A 2016 report from the Coalition for Juvenile Justice found that roughly 400,000 youth are homeless for some period of time each year. Youth of color and LGBTQ youth are more likely to be homeless than other youth.

We encourage the task force in its work to focus on youth of color and other youth that are part of vulnerable populations that may need more supports than others. In particular, youth with mental illnesses, disabilities, and substance use disorders are vulnerable and need increased access to resources.

In an effort to ensure that the task force has members with both knowledge about, and experience with, these wide-ranging topics, we recommend that the task force membership be expanded to include both individuals representing additional state agencies, as well as lay persons.

I urge the committee to support S.B. 318 and its efforts to help the youth of Connecticut.