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COMMENTS IN SUPPORT OF 17 H 5183 and S 237– PAROLE

The ACLU of Rhode Island strongly supports this bill, which requires that juveniles sentenced as adults come before the parole board no later than fifteen years into their sentence.

The psychological research is clear that juveniles have an underdeveloped sense of responsibility, are more vulnerable to peer pressure, are less capable than adults of perceiving and comprehending long term consequences, and have much less control of their environment in ways that are transient and change with age. The imposition of very long prison sentences on a person under 18 years of age constitutes, in our view, cruel and unusual punishment and violates basic human rights standards.

This legislation does not mandate the release of these individuals after fifteen years; the Parole Board maintains the discretion to deny parole to anyone they determine is not yet prepared to reenter community. This legislation ensures that children sentenced as adults come before the parole board early into their adulthood, granting them the opportunity to demonstrate how they have matured and changed since their childhood offense.

It is worth noting the incredibly broad range of national organizations that support parole eligibility for children sentenced as adults. They include the American Bar Association, the American Correctional Association, the American Probation and Parole Association, the American Psychological Association, the National PTA, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Support of this legislation would place Rhode Island in line with reforms occurring across the country in seventeen states, including Washington D.C, in addition to our neighboring states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont.

In short, no person under the age of 18 should be treated as irredeemable and locked away automatically for the majority of their life. The ACLU of Rhode Island respectfully urges the committee's support of this legislation.