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TEXAS ADVOCATES AND LEGISLATORS SHOW SUPPORT FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE
Youth Justice Action Month Press Conference Calls for Juvenile Justice Reform

AUSTIN, TX— A group of juvenile justice reform advocates hosted a press conference at the Texas Capitol today as part of [Youth Justice Action Month](#) calling for a new commitment to juvenile justice reform in Texas.

As part of Youth Justice Action Month, juvenile justice stakeholders across the country are raising awareness about the harms facing youth who come into contact with the justice system, and they are demanding fairer and more just treatment of America's youth.

"Our young people should be in school, not in the criminal justice system," said **Brett Merfish, Staff Attorney at Texas Appleseed**. "Texas has taken steps over the past few years to improve its juvenile justice system, but there is still a great deal to do. We must do everything in our power to divert our youth away from the justice system, ensure those who remain in it are housed as close to their homes and communities as possible, and commit our resources and services to providing these kids with the tools to succeed in the present and flourish in the future."

"It is imperative that we tackle the racial, mental health, substance abuse, and disability disparities in the juvenile justice system," said **Nick Hudson, smart justice strategist at the ACLU of Texas**. "Youth of color are disproportionately represented at all stages of the criminal justice system, and Black youth—who make up only 12% of Texas youth, but 38% of our juvenile justice admissions—are especially, and unjustly, overrepresented."

"Youth with mental illness and other disabilities are disproportionately represented at all stages of the justice system," said **Rachel Gandy, Mental Health Policy Fellow at Disability Rights Texas**. "In 2016, at least 31% of youth who were newly admitted to TJJD facilities had high or moderate mental health treatment needs. Another 28% had an identified special education need. Texas must vigilantly and actively address these overrepresentations to ensure that kids remain in the classroom, not in detention."

"Today, Texas children as young as 10 years old are sent to the juvenile justice system. No elementary school kid should ever be behind bars in Texas," said **Lauren Rose, Director of Youth Justice Policy at Texans Care for Children**. "We need to work with our mental health system, our schools, and the child welfare system to make sure supports for these youth are available outside of the juvenile justice system. And we need to raise the lower age of the juvenile justice system so that it cannot be used as a last resort for kids younger than 13."

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Texas is poised to be the last state in the nation to reform its juvenile justice system to include 17-year-old children. For decades, we have struggled to pass a ‘Raise the Age’ measure, which would increase the age of juvenile court jurisdiction from 17 to 18,” said **State Representative Gene Wu**. “It is harmful to public safety and to young offenders to confine youth in adult jails or prisons where they are significantly more likely to be physically and sexually assaulted, and where they are often placed in solitary confinement for extended periods. This year alone, around 23,000 17-year-olds in Texas will be arrested and receive an adult criminal record, which will create lifelong barriers to education, employment, and housing opportunities. Most importantly, this first strike against them will dramatically increase the likelihood that these kids will become future adult felons. Instead of this, we want the juvenile justice system to provide rehabilitative programming that will turn these kids into productive adults.”

“Nearly all 17-year-olds arrested in Texas are arrested for nonviolent and misdemeanor offenses,” said **Kyle Ward, Executive Director of Texas PTA**. “The juvenile justice system is better equipped to provide these youth with rehabilitation and with the tools they need to avoid further interactions with the justice system.”

“As people across the country raise awareness, strengthen coalitions, build campaigns, and encourage action during Youth Justice Action Month, the time is now for us to come together and create a juvenile justice system in Texas that is fair, efficient, and equitable,” said **Lindsey Linder, Policy Attorney at the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition**. “We urge advocates, state agencies, service providers, and lawmakers to join our movement to transform the juvenile justice system into one worthy of Texas’ youth.”

The organizations represented at the press conference included the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, Texas Appleseed, ACLU of Texas, Texans Care for Children, Texas PTA, and Disability Rights Texas. They were joined by State Representative Gene Wu.

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The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition works with peers, policy-makers, practitioners, and community members to identify and promote smart justice policies that safely reduce the state’s costly over-reliance on incarceration – creating stronger families, safer communities, and a brighter future for Texas.