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Contact: Renée Slajda
(203) 231-7285
rslajda@laccr.org

Raise the Age Louisiana Act Becomes Law
Bill to Include 17-Year-Olds in the Juvenile Justice System Part of Sweeping Reform

BATON ROUGE, LA – On Tuesday, Governor John Bel Edwards signed into law a major reform measure that will include 17-year-olds in the juvenile justice system. The Raise the Age Louisiana Act (SB 324) brings Louisiana into step with the vast majority of states that set the age of criminal jurisdiction at 18. The bill is part of a package of juvenile justice reforms that were overwhelmingly approved by the legislature.

“Raise the Age is simply common sense policy,” said Governor Edwards, who included the bill in his 2016 legislative agenda. “We know that at 17 a young person’s brain is still developing. We recognize this when it comes to voting, joining the military, or even buying a lottery ticket. We should give prosecutors and district attorneys the flexibility to recognize that as well when it comes to the age-appropriate sentencing that 41 other states and 66 percent of Louisianans support. In the end, it’s about not giving up on any young person.”

The governor has called Raise the Age a “down payment” on a wider criminal justice reform agenda he plans to pursue in 2017.

SB 324, which was sponsored by Sen. J.P. Morrell, D-New Orleans, and carried in the House by Rep. Sherman Mack, R-Albany, received near unanimous, bipartisan support in both chambers. Polling by LSU shows that two-thirds of Louisianans – a majority of both parties – also back the measure.

“The Legislature followed the will of the people,” said Josh Perry, executive director of the Louisiana Center for Children’s Rights and member of the Louisiana Youth Justice Coalition, a network of 70 organizations across the state that advocated for the four-bill package that included the Raise the Age Act.

“The runaway success of Raise the Age and other common-sense juvenile justice reforms in this legislative session show that Louisiana is united in wanting a juvenile justice system that is safe, smart, cost-effective, and fair. The entire Coalition is grateful to the governor, to Sen. Morrell, and to all of the other legislators who showed leadership in enthusiastically passing these bills—in particular, to Rep. Mack, our floor leader in the House; to Rep. Pat Smith, who was the first legislator to file a Raise the Age bill; and to Speaker I Walt Leger, who filed the study resolution that jumpstarted this conversation last year.”

In April, the Louisiana Youth Justice Coalition released a report outlining the benefits of holding 17-year-olds accountable in age-appropriate settings. Research demonstrates that children held
in the juvenile justice system are 34 percent less likely to reoffend than those held in the adult system. While an adult arrest record can prevent young people from pursuing higher education and good careers, the juvenile system provides them with the educational and social supports they need to turn their lives around.

"Raise the Age is a significant step in the right direction for public safety in Louisiana. It represents an investment in our children and our communities - a commitment we must continue into the future. I applaud the efforts and the leadership of the governor and those members of the House and Senate who helped make this happen," said Lafayette Parish Sheriff Mike Neustrom.

Lafayette Parish alone expects to save close to $500,000 a year by no longer having to implement federally-mandated protections to prevent the physical and sexual abuse of minors held in adult correctional facilities. A legislated study by LSU projects statewide savings of up to $20 million per year.

More than 90 percent of alleged offenses committed by 17-year-olds in Louisiana involve neither violence nor a weapon. The bill does not, however, affect the existing ability of DAs to transfer the most serious offenses to adult court.

“I am thrilled that the Legislature listened to the voices of young people like me who want to see this change happen,” said Dante Hills, a 19-year-old who spoke at Louisiana Youth Justice Day, which drew more than 300 youth to the Capitol in support of Raise the Age. “All we want is a fair chance to succeed, and we’re grateful to our legislators for hearing our call to action.”

Raise the Age is part of a larger package of juvenile justice reform bills signed into law by Governor Edwards. All four bills were sponsored by Sen. Morrell and supported by the Louisiana Youth Justice Coalition. The bills affect many aspects of the system: SB 301 imposes a default 9-month cap on sentences for nonviolent offenses in the juvenile justice system; SB 303 builds an entirely new system for education accountability in Louisiana’s juvenile justice schools; and SB 302 creates a mechanism for ensuring effective counsel for imprisoned children.

Learn more about the bills on the Coalition’s website.

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