REPEAL MANDATORY SENTENCES FOR KIDS

When children make serious mistakes, we entrust our judges to hold them accountable and decide how to best rehabilitate them. But mandatory sentences take these decisions out of the hands of judges and fail to make our communities safer.

In 1993, Senator David Vitter, then a state representative, passed a law to impose mandatory sentences on children convicted of certain serious crimes. 14- to 16-year-olds who face such sentences – commonly referred to as “Vitter kids” – must serve out their full terms in custody, which can be until their 21st birthdays. This means that, even if a child does well and achieves rehabilitation, a judge is prohibited from bringing them home early on parole.

Imposing mandatory sentences isn’t an effective way to hold children accountable and ensure that they become productive members of society. Rather, we must give judges back discretion to determine when a child is safe to come home.

Repealing Mandatory Sentences is SAFE

- “Vitter sentences” do not make us safer. Studies show that unnecessarily long stays in prison have no positive effect on reoffending rates and may actually increase recidivism – thus endangering the communities to which kids return.

- Children who complete Vitter sentences are released at the end of their sentence without any supervision or re-entry supports. Kids who are released early on parole, however, are given the structure and supports they need to stay out of the justice system for good.

Repealing Mandatory Sentences is SMART

- When children can be released on parole supervision for good behavior and completing programming, they are more incentivized to work hard toward their rehabilitation. Once a child achieves rehabilitation, a judge should be able to decide whether to bring them home.

Repealing Mandatory Sentences is COST-EFFECTIVE

- Mandatory sentences waste money. Once children are held accountable and properly rehabilitated, there is no sensible reason to keep them locked in prison at the cost of $280/day. The Office of Juvenile Justice (OJJ) is forced to absorb these costs, even after a child has completed all the programming they have to offer.

- On average, Louisiana taxpayers are spending more than $400,000 per child currently incarcerated under a Vitter sentence. That’s a total of $15.8 million for all Vitter kids currently in OJJ custody. If we reduce each child’s dispositions by only one year, the state would save $3.9 million.

Repealing Mandatory Sentences is FAIR

- Every child and every case is unique, so we must allow judges to take into account a child’s individual circumstances. Judges should be able to decide how much time a child needs to serve in order to be held accountable and fully rehabilitated, and when it is safe for them to come home.