

CT adult prisons a ‘war zone’ for youth offenders

By Lisa Backus, CTNewsJunkie.com

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HARTFORD — Romelo Goss was 17 years old and had no money for phone calls home while being held as an adult in the Manson Youth Institution.

“At the time, my family was struggling,” the Bridgeport resident, now 23, said.

He recalled the prison environment “was like a war zone.” He contemplated suicide and since he was being investigated as a gang member, he was placed in “security risk group status,” which meant at times he would spend 23 hours a day alone in his cell.

Close to a year after his release from a two-year prison sentence on a weapons conviction, Goss is now training to become a professional boxer. He also is a Justice Advisor with the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, speaking up about prison reform to help other juveniles and young adults.

“Youth don’t belong in adult prison,” Goss said Monday morning as he waited to tell his story to a crowd of dozens gathered at the Capitol. “I’m here to speak about my experiences.”



*Romelo Goss, left, and Kye Pettway, justice advisors with the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, spoke during the presentation on the adult prison environment youth offenders face in Connecticut.
Photo: Lisa Backus / CTNewsJunkie.com*

Goss was among the panel for “Connecticut Youth in Adult Prison: Why and how other states have already ended this practice,” a presentation hosted by legislators and juvenile justice organizations to present the reality that teens face every day while incarcerated.

What Goss described is what Rep. Robyn Porter, D-New Haven, called the “crib to coffin” pipeline. “People who look like me are born into the system and are dying in the system,” Porter said. “The system needs to be dismantled and rebuilt.”

The presentation comes as legislators are wrestling with a handful of bills designed to deal with what law enforcement and prosecutors say is a spike in juvenile car thefts that has led to serious crashes and in some cases, deaths.

Most juvenile justice advocates oppose adding car thefts to the list of crimes that would allow juveniles to be transferred to the adult prison system.

That's for a good reason, according to state Child Advocate Sarah Eagan.

Male juveniles held as adults in Manson are not getting enough mental health services, educational opportunities, rehabilitation services or family support, Eagan told the group. Children up to the age of 17 are spending 23 hours a day in their cells, with no contact from the outside world including family and friends, Eagan said.

One male youth spent 70 days out of nine months in nearly total confinement, receiving no meaningful programming and no schooling, she said. However, that practice is supposed to have been banned for teens jailed in Connecticut.

About half of the youth surveyed in the state's adult prison system considered harming themselves or thought they would die in the next 12 months, according to an extensive study released by Eagan's office in January.

Mental health issues among the population of 15- to 17-year-old males held at Manson aren't being addressed, she said. "We found that no incarcerated youth (among males) receives regular mental health treatment while in custody," Eagan said.

In fact, she pointed out, most were designated as not needing regular clinical support and more than half of the boys completed "zero or one" education or rehabilitation program while incarcerated.

Juvenile females held at York Correctional Institution fared better: Eagan said they receive more mental health treatment and more programming opportunities. But there are less than a handful of female juveniles being held at the state's only prison for women at any given time.

The male juveniles sometimes are exposed to pepper spray, a chemical agent that is harmful to children, she said. Many are not receiving regular visits from their families and no family therapy is available to incarcerated juveniles, Eagan added.

The roughly 50 juvenile males held at Manson are predominantly of color, mostly black, she said. "It's a foundational problem," Eagan said. Studies cited by juvenile justice advocates concluded that juvenile males of color are held in prison at disproportionately higher rates than their white counterparts.

Half are being held during pre-trial proceedings, the other half are being held on sentences, according to the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, one of the sponsors of the event, which is advocating the removal of everyone under the age of 18 from Manson and York by 2021.

The state's Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee is also recommending that all youth be taken out of adult prison facilities by Jan. 1, 2021, in accordance with a 2018 federal law.

Connecticut ranks 6th in the nation in the number of juveniles being held in adult prisons during pre-trial proceedings, according to Jeree Thomas, policy director for the Campaign for Youth Justice.

With no mental health services and no rehabilitation services, it's unlikely that adult prison will have a good impact on juveniles or the community, Eagan said.

"If we want to improve public safety and we want people to get better, this is not the way to do it," Eagan said. "The use of prison to change kids' behavior has been an unequivocal failure."

Connecticut Youth in Adult Prison: Why and How Other States Have Ended this Practice
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