

September 10, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Paul Ryan
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (S. 860/H.R. 1809)

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Speaker Ryan, Minority Leader Schumer, and Minority Leader Pelosi:

Another anniversary of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP A) has passed without much-needed reauthorization of this law that protects children in the juvenile justice system, effectively addresses high-risk and delinquent behavior, and improves community safety. We urge you to work with your colleagues to get this legislation across the finish line as soon as possible.

At the Southern Poverty Law Center, we work across five southern states to protect the interests of children who fall into the criminal justice system. In Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana alone, more than 90,000 children were arrested in 2014. We take our role in protecting these vulnerable youth seriously, and you should, too.

The JJDP A, signed into law on Sept. 7, 1974, forged a partnership between federal, state and local governments, offering funding to states that agree to monitor and comply with protecting system-involved youth. It hasn't been reauthorized since 2002. In the years since, thousands of children have entered the justice system and have not had the benefit of the most up-to-date, evidenced-based practices; nor have the core JJDP A protections been strengthened; nor have states had the benefit of federal support they need to help our youth and keep the community safe.

Bipartisan-supported bills (H.R. 1809 and S. 860) passed both chambers of Congress more than a year ago, and need only minor reconciliatory tweaks. Across the country, youth and people seeking to help them are depending on you to reauthorize the JJDP A.

The JJDP A reauthorization would provide three core protections to system-involved youth: it would strengthen the deinstitutionalization of status offenders, help remove young people from adult jails and keep them safe from adult prisoners, and reduce racial and ethnic disparities among children who

are brought into the justice system. It's up to Congress to ensure and expand on those protections through the bills that are currently pending.

Reauthorizing the JJDPa will help ensure that children are not should not be incarcerated for common youthful behavior like missing curfew or running away from home. Locking up children for status offenses is harmful to youth development, costly to the tax payer and less effective than alternatives like crisis counseling and school-based interventions.

Children should never be held in adult jails, and the JJDPa aims to minimize the instances in which they are. When children are housed in adult jails instead of juvenile facilities, they are more susceptible to become victims of assault and suicide – and are more likely to re-offend when they are released. Locking children up in adult facilities puts both youth and public safety at risk. If children are housed in adult jails, it is imperative that there is sight and sound separation of adults and youth, as the JJDPa requires.

Children of color are disproportionately over-represented and more harshly punished compared to white youth at all levels of the juvenile justice system. The JJDPa ensures that states and local municipalities implement data-driven approaches to ensure fairness and reduce racial disparities in how children are charged and sanctioned in the juvenile justice system.

With evidence-based practices that put youth first, we can reduce recidivism, save tax dollars and improve public safety. It is time for members of Congress to act. We urge you and your colleagues to show your commitment to our nation's youth and their futures by reauthorizing the JJDPa.

Sincerely,



Lisa Graybill
Deputy Legal Director
Southern Poverty Law Center

CC: Senator Chuck Grassley, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, Representative Jason Lewis, and Representative Bobby Scott