

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Hearing on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act  
February 28, 2017**

For over four decades, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP A) has provided critical protections for youth in the juvenile justice system. I have long supported efforts to reauthorize and strengthen this law because I have seen firsthand the success of such efforts in Vermont, where the JJDP A has supported important services for young people and those who care for them. I was disappointed last year when a single Senate Republican prevented the Senate from passing bipartisan legislation to reauthorize the JJDP A, and I am hopeful we can finally make progress this year.

We know that our juvenile justice system needs improvement. In 2012, the then-Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights led by Senator Durbin convened a hearing on the school-to-prison pipeline. We heard gripping testimony about how too many young people were being funneled into the criminal justice system rather than into programs to support their growth. That same year, I also convened a hearing about the rising prison costs that were—and still are—consuming the Department of Justice’s budget. We simply must reform our criminal justice system so that more money is going into prevention and treatment instead of incarceration.

As we set out last Congress to reauthorize the JJDP A, Chairman Grassley convened an oversight hearing so that we could be sure to pass carefully crafted legislation that responded to today’s needs. In a bipartisan fashion, Chairman Grassley and Senator Whitehouse worked with members of this Committee to ensure the JJDP A required accountability. Today’s hearing is a continuation of our work, but we must not lose sight of the progress we made last Congress.

The bill this Committee reported last Congress by voice vote included several provisions I authored to prevent youth homelessness and improve reentry programs. Young people who enter the juvenile justice system are more likely to face homelessness once they are released, so we have to make sure young people returning to our communities are equipped to succeed. That includes supporting grant programs to help states improve their juvenile justice systems and to prevent young people from becoming involved in crime.

Consistent with our Committee’s bipartisan efforts last Congress to bring more fairness to outdated drug sentencing laws, the JJDP A we approved also included long overdue reforms to prevent kids from being locked up for “status offenses.” While this prohibition has always been one of the core requirements of the JJDP A, an exception has allowed this practice to continue for repeat status offenders in 26 states and the District of Columbia. Juvenile justice advocates, judges, and practitioners agree that no child should be behind bars for minor offenses like missing school, running away, or coming home after curfew. I am glad to see support for this common sense reform continue this Congress.

Our good faith efforts to improve the JJDP A can only reach their potential if those working on the ground have the proper training. There is urgent need to train judges and court personnel. And today, we will hear from dedicated service providers who understand the need

for additional support, including dedicated support for training. We must listen to those working on the front lines and support their needs, just as we did last Congress when we included vital reforms to support training.

I hope we recommit this year to working to end youth homelessness. Soon, I will be reintroducing my bipartisan legislation with Senator Collins to reauthorize and strengthen the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. Young people who enter the juvenile justice system are particularly at risk of homelessness when they are released. Many are vulnerable to trafficking, and sometimes engage in criminal activity just to survive. By ensuring every young person has a safe place to live upon release, we can stop the revolving door that leads youth back to the criminal justice system.

In recent years, this Committee has come together on many efforts to reform our criminal justice system, and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act is an important part of that effort. I am confident that we will again approve bipartisan legislation, and I hope this year the Senate finally does the same. I thank Chairman Grassley and Senator Whitehouse for their continued work on this bill, and for working with me on key provisions. We owe it to our young people and our communities to reform the juvenile justice system.

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