

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,
On the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2015
July 23, 2015**

I am proud to cosponsor this bill to reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP A) that has provided critical services to young people for 41 years. This Act expired in 2007 and many of you worked with me when I led reauthorization efforts in 2008 and 2009. Both bills were successfully reported out of this Committee, and I am glad that we will likely do so again today. I thank the Chairman and Senator Whitehouse for their work on this bill, which I hope we can get signed into law.

I am glad that several of my provisions designed to prevent youth homelessness are included in the manager's amendment. The rise of runaway and homeless youth is a problem both nationally and in Vermont, and it is an issue that I have been working to address. Young people who enter the juvenile justice system are more likely to face homelessness once they are released. If we are thoughtful in our approach, we can make sure young people who go back into the community are more equipped to succeed. Through this bill, we have an opportunity to do just that.

One basic, but important action we can take is requiring a reentry plan for every child released from custody to include a description of where that young person will live. I thank the chairman for including this provision in today's bill. Too often, homeless youth shelters are overwhelmed with young people who come out of detention facilities and do not have a safe place to go. They are vulnerable to traffickers, abusers, and a cycle of victimization if we do not intervene.

It is not surprising that many youth without a safe place to go often return to our juvenile detention facilities, sometimes engaging in criminal behavior just to survive. We need to stop this revolving door.

This bill will also help us get accurate data on the scope of youth homelessness by requiring annual reports to Congress on the type of living arrangements juveniles enter upon release. This information will give us a critical view into where these youth are going. I am grateful that this reporting requirement was included at my urging. I thank the National Network for Youth for working with me on these important additions to help end youth homelessness.

One of the most important changes in this bill will prevent kids from being locked up for "status offenses" like missing school, running away, or coming home after curfew. It phases out an exception to one of the core requirements, so that no child will be behind bars for minor infractions. That is the way it should be, and this change is supported by juvenile justice advocates, judges, and practitioners. It is overdue and I am glad to see it included.

Another component of this bill that is urgently needed in my home state of Vermont is resources to train judges and court personnel. There are critical updates to the law in this bill, but until we train our judges these are just words on a page. We need to ensure that those who carry out the law fully understand how to implement these changes. I appreciate the inclusion of this language and know it will make a difference in Vermont and across the country.

I would like to thank Ken Schatz, Commissioner of the Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF) and his staff for their assistance with this bill, and for the excellent work being carried out with JJDPA funding across the state of Vermont.

One of the most impressive programs in Vermont funded under this Act is a program to identify youth at risk of being removed from their families, and address the underlying issues. The Strengthening Families Program helps families and children with open DCF cases by facilitating access to mental health resources, counseling, substance abuse treatment, housing, childcare and transportation. The program has already proven successful, reducing the number of children removed from 30 percent of all open DCF cases to 7 to 12 percent of all cases in just 18 months.

Many of us on this Committee have talked at length about the need for criminal justice reform, and that is true in both the adult and juvenile systems. As my friend Judge Amy Davenport said, "If we don't address the juvenile system, we have lost the battle before we start." We cannot lose the battle, there is too much at stake. We need to pass this bill today.

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