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OFFICE OF VICTIM ADVOCATE

Giving Crime Victims a Voice

Courage • Strength • Resilience

To: Senate Judiciary Committee

From: Suzanne V. Estrella, Esq.,
Commonwealth Victim Advocate

Date: May 23, 2022

Re: Senate Bills 1226, 1227, 1228 and 1229

Good Morning, thank you to Chairs Baker and Santarsiero, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee for the opportunity to address this important issue.

As the Commonwealth Victim Advocate I find myself uniquely positioned to see the gravity of the impact of crime in our communities. And when the offenders are juveniles, the potential for rippling effects is even greater, particularly among black and brown youth. The Office of the Victim Advocate supports the bill package presented here today and applauds the effort of the Juvenile Justice Task Force to balance offender accountability with the hope of restorative justice. However, the failure to include victims and or victim advocates as members of the task force to engage in the process is disheartening and misaligned with true justice. The outcomes of the task force will directly impact victims and true justice requires that individuals who are harmed be heard.

Restorative justice, is a process that identifies harms and obligations and seeks to make things as right as possible. Restorative justice practices require offender accountability and support victim empowerment. Incorporating restorative justice practices into the juvenile justice system provides the opportunity to fairly balance crime survivor needs and the needs of youthful offenders; creating space for equity, respect and compassion.

As we swing the pendulum away from out of home placements for juveniles, and seek to support programs and initiatives that create opportunities for young people to succeed and thrive, it is imperative that we simultaneously address the impact of adverse childhood experiences and find ways to teach children to heal and navigate their way through these negative experiences. There are significant studies in the field of neuroscience supporting the ability of the brain to be re-wired and repaired from adverse childhood experiences. Since we know the devastating impact of adverse childhood experiences, as responsible adults, we must find ways to give children the tools they need to build resiliency and strength in ways that are safe and healthy. I am happy to provide additional information on these studies at the Committee's request.

Currently the Office of Victim Advocate has 767 crime survivors registered as a result of victimization by a youthful offender. Each registered survivor represents the loss of a loved

one that can never be replaced. While these violent offenders are not the subject of this legislation, these too are children that should not be forgotten.

It is likely that among a number as large as 767, opinions will differ regarding the treatment of youthful offenders. What I can say, is that every crime survivor wants what happened to them to never happen to anyone else. Crime prevention initiatives at the state and local level are crucial to creating safer caring communities where justice thrives. It is our hope that this legislative package along with the report and recommendations from the Juvenile Justice Task Force serve as the beginning of crime prevention initiatives that completely divert young people from any involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Thank you.