

My Le written testimony for May 23, 2022 Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing

My name is My Le, I am a youth organizer and restorative justice facilitator with the Youth Art & Self-empowerment Project (YASP). I am currently 22 and I was locked up and charged as an adult at the age of 17. I was held at RCF, an adult jail in Philadelphia. I was held there for 8 months just to end up getting sent to the juvenile system. None of those 8 months counted once I was in the juvenile system. When I was in adult jail, I went through depression because really all you are doing is sitting in a cell, with no resources or counseling. I had male correctional officers lock me in my cell for days at a time because I wouldn't respond to their sexual harassment. Many days I would be kept in my cell 23 hours a day because they prioritized giving adults recreational time. I was basically punished with solitary confinement for being a child. Think about your own children - can you imagine them locked in a room for 23 hours a day? Seeing no one, talking to no one? It nearly broke me.

60% of direct file cases get sent to the juvenile system or dismissed, including my case which got transferred to juvenile court after 8 months in adult custody. Prosecuting children as adults is wasteful and during my time spent in jail, I can honestly say not once did I ever think about taking accountability for what I'd done. I was just locked in a cage with nothing to do, focused on how scared I was about what might happen at court instead of thinking about what I could do to make things right with the person I harmed. In my situation - like for so many young people - the system just created more harm instead of moving towards healing for me or the person I harmed.

Community organizations that came in to support me are what motivated me to change and become a better person to come home and help other young people. Unfortunately not too many young people are able to be offered this help and support to thrive, so they come home and make the same mistakes.

After I sat for 8 months at the Philadelphia women adult jail, I was sent to placement to sit for 12 months. I didn't have such a good experience. Seeing a male staff restraining a 15 year old girl by suffocating her, made me scared of what other things these male staffs will do to these other girls or myself. The placement I was at also kept mail from me, even my legal mail. So I didn't have a way to talk to my family, only once or twice a week when they let us make phone calls. Before I was able to leave, I had to pay off my fines and fees. They didn't tell me how much I had owed, they just told me to start working in the kitchen. They didn't let me know if I was close to paying it off or not. I came to find out that I had worked way more hours than what I had owed. No reimbursement of those extra hours were sent to me as well. This was free labor in return for my freedom.

Coming home wasn't an easy transition for me. I applied to 150 jobs on a job searching website called Indeed, and not one job got back to me because of my criminal background. Same with apartments and moving. It's really hard to find housing because I have to find specific apartments that will approve my background. It has been 3 years since I've been home and I still have these issues. Young people that run into these same issues will turn to things that will get them in trouble because they can't find a home or a job to take care of themselves.

Our children deserve better than what I experienced in the adult and juvenile justice systems. That's why I urge you to pass legislation that ends direct file, puts strict limits on when a young person can be held in juvenile detention, eliminates fines and fees in the juvenile system, and makes juvenile record expungement quick and automatic.