



**S. 4— An Act Relating to Reducing Crimes of Violence associated with Juveniles and Dangerous Weapons**

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Thank you for the invitation to speak with the committee today about S.4.

The Vermont Network is deeply appreciative of the work that this committee has done to expand juvenile justice and how far we have come over the last few years. We remain committed to the overall purpose and direction of this work and believe that it is beneficial for long-term community safety. Policy changes related to Raise the Age and Youthful Offender have helped to move our legal responses to criminal behavior among emerging adults towards greater alignment with criminal justice reform efforts and the neurobiology of emerging adults.

Advances in neuroscience have demonstrated that the brain is not fully developed until an individual reaches their twenties, and that the adolescent brain is highly responsive to risk-taking, peer influence and reward systems. We are also deepening our understanding of the impacts of trauma on the lives of youth, and the ways that responses to trauma can manifest as harmful, and even criminal, behaviors. We believe that it is essential that youth who commit crimes have access to resources and interventions beyond punitive legal responses. Access to systems of accountability, supervision and support help ensure that youth can grow and develop into full and productive members of our communities.

**Juvenile Support**

Juveniles who are charged with domestic violence, sexual violence or even human trafficking are most likely victims of trauma, abuse, and violence themselves. This said, these crimes are serious offenses. These are not victimless crimes, and they deeply impact community safety.

Our goals in how the system responds to these youth should be first and foremost to intervene with the intent to interrupt a trajectory and rehabilitate them so that they can develop healthy relationship skills and live safe, productive lives within our communities. While changes to court procedure may assist in ensuring that these cases proceed in a streamlined fashion, treatment and intervention must be a coequal part of this approach. Adolescent and emerging adult brains are the most malleable and amenable to intervention. This is a critical moment for intervention and treatment as it relates to long-term re-offense outcomes. And yet, to date, there are insufficient treatment options as it relates to domestic and sexual violence. For example, we still have no youth specific Domestic Violence Accountability Programming (DVAP) in the state. Youth are unable to participate within the adult DVAP system (as they should be). DCF used an RFP process to develop a proposal for a youth pilot intervention



program, and a final report was issued by a team at Bennington College. While this proposal holds much promise, it has still not been funded or initiated by the Department.

It is important to note that even before the expansions of our raise the age and YO systems, there was a lack of resources and treatment available to support justice involved youth, but policy was put in place with the hope and intention that treatment systems would expand to hold these youth. However, for a variety of reasons, these treatment and intervention services have not been expanded to meet the needs of this population. This lack of investment in treatment and intervention is, in our opinion, the most pressing issue with our juvenile justice system. These intervention options need to be accessible to all youth who need them across the state, regardless of where they reside. We are excited to see the proposal for community grants and would ask the committee to consider how these funds could be used to prioritize geographic equity in access to interventions.

### **Victim Rights**

If the committee decides to make changes to where youthful offender proceedings are housed, such as the suggestion to move YO proceedings from family division to a sealed criminal proceeding, we would advocate that there be additional language to ensure that victims retain all the rights and access that were afforded to them last year upon the passage of S. 224, Act 160. Domestic and sexual violence are intimately personal crimes and victim involvement in these court proceedings is often essential to their healing and safety, as well as to the offender's learning and rehabilitation.

We thank the committee for your consideration, and for all your efforts to advance policies that increase safety for victims of crime and our communities. We are committed to the strong and data-driven policy behind the expansion of our juvenile justice system and look forward to working with the committee to strengthen that system in ways that also enhance community safety over the long-term.