



The CAMPAIGN for the  
FAIR SENTENCING  
of YOUTH

## **Statement of Survivors and Family Members of Victims of Youth Violence in Support of Abolishing Life Without the Possibility of Parole as a Sentencing Option for Children**

We are writing as people who have either directly suffered harm at the hands of a youth offender or have lost loved ones to youth violence, to add our voices to the diverse chorus that supports ending life without parole as a sentencing option for children. We are at a unique moment in which twenty-nine states and jurisdictions, including Arkansas, the Dakotas, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming, have all passed laws affirming that no child should ever be told that they have no hope but to die in prison.

As people who have personally experienced the tragic pain of losing a loved one to youth violence or suffering it ourselves, we do not lightly encourage you to support this crucial legislation. Our individual journeys have been marked by grief, anger, and many unanswered questions. And although our lives have forever been altered by the violent actions of people who were under 18 at the time, we are firm in our conviction that children never cease to be deserving of our compassion and concern, as they simultaneously represent the most vulnerable members of our community and our most valuable resource as we work for a more just future. When children cause harm, as they did in our lives, it is important to hold them accountable in trauma-informed, age-appropriate ways that leave room for the profound potential that they have to move beyond their worst moments and experience dramatic positive transformation. Because of our painful experiences, we are deeply committed to the hope of redemption and second chances, and a belief that all of us are more than the worst thing we have ever done. We encourage you to support youth sentencing policies that are in harmony with these fundamental values. We believe that when a person who has served a lengthy sentence for a crime she or he committed as a child is able to demonstrate rehabilitation, we must give them an opportunity to lean into the future awaiting them outside prison walls.

The road we have traveled is a hard one, and many people whose lives have been impacted by youth violence have not arrived at the point where they can advocate for second chances for people who committed crimes when they were teenagers. We understand their feelings. But through our own process of healing, we have come to know many people who were incarcerated as children, some of whom served decades for crimes they committed before they were old enough to vote, sign a contract, get married, serve on a jury or in the military, or, in some cases, even drive a car. We have seen with our own eyes that redemption is possible, that when a young person is given a second chance, they can accomplish so much good, and in this way, they can try to make up for the harm they caused. These individuals are making countless positive contributions to their communities by raising loving families, serving as mentors to at-risk youth, and working as school teachers, substance abuse counselors, restorative justice practitioners, social workers, violence intervention specialists, and advocates for sentencing reform. It is truly a blessing to stand in solidarity with people whose lives bear witness that we should never give up on a child.

Ending juvenile life without parole is about making sure all children have hope because every child matters. Every child is worthy of our care and concern. We have faith that every state considering such legislation will benefit from following the example of twenty-nine other states and jurisdictions that have already abolished life without parole as a sentencing option for kids. We have been proud to advocate for bills like this in states as diverse as Arkansas, Illinois, Maryland, Ohio, and New Mexico, and we will continue to urge lawmakers to give the hope of a second chance to people who received lengthy sentences for crimes they committed when they were still children.

Very sincerely,

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Sharletta Evans (Colorado)  
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