Raise the Age Michigan: A Toolkit for Grassroots Organizers

The age of majority in the state of Michigan is 18 years old. Those under the age of 18 cannot buy tobacco, get married, enlist in military service, or vote. However, Michigan requires that 17-year-olds who have committed a crime be automatically charged and tried as adults. Juveniles as young as 10 years old have been tried as adults, convicted, and placed into adult correctional facilities.\(^1\) Within these facilities, teens are significantly more likely to face sexual, physical and mental abuse and to suffer psychological damage because of their incarceration.\(^2\)

Michigan is one of only five states in the union that has laws requiring the automatic prosecution of 17-year-olds as adults. The current laws do not take into consideration the developmental requirements of juveniles, relative to their adult counterparts. Adult criminal facilities are not equipped to provide the educational, emotional and psychological necessities for juvenile development.

In lieu of the information above, we recommend that Michigan raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 17 to 18. Additionally, we recommend that all youth under the age of 18 be removed from adult correctional facilities and be relocated to facilities which can adequately serve their developmental needs.

This toolkit will allow volunteers to involve themselves in the Raise the Age campaign, make a difference by highlighting the plight of incarcerated youth in the adult system, and effectively advocate for much-needed policy change.
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INFORMATION FOR ADVOCACY
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the mid-1990s, Michigan lawmakers joined their counterparts in a national trend of “getting tough on youth crime.” Although crime rates were steadily declining, state legislators here passed a series of harsh laws that effectively funneled thousands of youth under age 18 into the adult criminal justice system.

Policymakers have determined that children younger than 18 are not yet mature enough to vote, enlist in the military, serve on a jury, sign a binding contract, or purchase alcohol. Yet, if they find themselves in trouble with the law, even for a minor, non-violent offense, they are automatically prosecuted as an adult, face a possible prison sentence, and can have a lifelong conviction. Currently, 44 other states allow 17-year-olds to access rehabilitative services only available in the juvenile justice system. Additionally, over half of states that enacted harsh policies in the 90s have amended their laws, citing increased public safety, cost-savings, and improved outcomes for youth as reasons for reform.3

The Supreme Court has recognized that youth are marked by “vulnerability and comparative lack of control over their immediate surroundings,” and that they are “more vulnerable or susceptible to negative influences and outside pressures.”4

Approximately two-thirds of 17-year-olds convicted in Michigan as adults are convicted of non-violent offenses.5 But when these youths are sentenced to time in adult prisons they face extreme risk of violence, sexual assault, and self-harm. Studies show that length of stay in correctional facilities does not correlate with reduced reoffending upon release. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that sentencing youth in the adult criminal justice system increase, rather than decreases, the likelihood they will reoffend, as compared with youth served in the juvenile system.6 Without receiving the support necessary to successfully return to their communities, teens exiting the adult criminal system face extreme barriers to accessing education, job prospects, and housing.
FAST FACTS

- In Michigan, 17-year-olds are automatically prosecuted as adults if they get in trouble with the law, even for non-violent offenses.

- Over the past decade, more than 20,000 youth under 18 were convicted as adults and placed under the supervision of the Michigan Department of Corrections; 95% of these youths were 17-years-old at the time of their offense.\(^7\)

- 17-year-olds who spend time in adult jails and prisons are exposed to extreme risk of physical and sexual violence, restraint, solitary confinement and suicide.

- Youth of color are disproportionately prosecuted as adults at 17. Even though youth of color only account for 23% of the population statewide, 53% of youth entering MDOC jurisdiction at age 17 were youth of color.\(^7\)

- Teens exiting the adult system are 34% more likely to reoffend, to reoffend sooner, and escalate to more violent offenses than their counterparts in the juvenile justice system.

- Incarcerating youth is expensive. The average cost of housing a prisoner in Michigan is about $34,000 a year, with an average sentence served of 4.3 years. A young person convicted in the adult system can expect to earn 40% less over their lifetime, which translates to a loss of state tax revenue.

- To comply with the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), many counties will see increased costs to reconfigure their jails to separate 17-year-olds “sight and sound” from older inmates. Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction would allow 17-year-olds to be housed with other youth in existing juvenile facilities.

- Like other states that have previously raised their age of juvenile jurisdiction, county and state governments will see long-term cost savings due to fewer crimes committed once a young person reaches adulthood, and the reduction of future costs associated with crime victims.

- Juvenile courts offer highly effective diversion and community-based programs not accessible in adult court. Since the majority of 17-year-olds have committed non-violent offenses, they would likely respond well to community-based options that are designed to keep kids in school, address underlying treatment needs, and engage the whole family.
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Question:** What difference does it make whether 17-year-olds are tried as youths or adults?

**Answer:** The fact that youth are still developing means that they are particularly amenable to rehabilitation, and particularly vulnerable to trauma and abuse. They need rehabilitative services specifically designed for youth. Treating youth as adults in the criminal justice system denies them meaningful exposure to developmental resources and puts them at risk of sexual, psychological and physical abuse. These are the things that make them likely to reoffend.

**Question:** Shouldn’t teens who commit adult crimes face adult punishment?

**Answer:** Research clearly shows that youth and adults are developmentally different so treating them the same—using the same policies and procedures to address their behavior—is legally suspect. The U.S. Supreme Court held that, as a matter of law, “children cannot be viewed simply as miniature adults.”

**Question:** Aren’t 17-year-olds capable of making logical decisions?

**Answer:** The Supreme Court also said that “criminal procedure laws that fail to take defendants youthfulness into account at all” should be seen as “flawed.” Legal distinctions are made between youth and adults in voting, jury service, military enlistment and many other areas, recognizing teens are still maturing and developing psychologically.

**Question:** Some of these teens are real criminals who will commit more crime so shouldn’t we protect our communities from them?

**Answer:** Actually, most of 17-year-olds entering the criminal justice system were charged with a non-violent offense, with many having no prior juvenile record. However, having an adult record as a teenager makes it tougher to get a job, obtain an education, or secure housing. As a result, youth with adult records will be more likely to commit future crimes. That is why researchers say prosecuting youth as adults increases crime rates in the long run.

**Question:** If they don’t go to prison, where do they go?

**Answer:** While research indicates that community-based programs and services are more cost-effective and yield better outcomes for court-involved youth, there are times when public safety requires the removal of a youth from the home. Accordingly, Michigan has private and public juvenile justice facilities with varying security levels that are better equipped than adult prisons to rehabilitate youth in a more age/developmentally appropriate manner.
KEY MESSAGING

It is important to use simple messages that make your point and are easy to remember. Here are a few samples.

**Message:** The legal age of consent in Michigan is 18-years-old, but **17-year-olds are automatically treated as adults** in the justice system.

**Message:** While the State of Michigan treats 17-year-olds as adults for prosecution, it **does not allow youth 17 and younger to do any of the following:**

1. Drop out of school
2. Enter a legal contract
3. Enlist in the military without parental consent
4. Serve on a jury
5. Vote in elections
6. Live independently from their parent or guardian
7. Purchase or use tobacco
8. Work in jobs involving cash transactions without adult supervision
9. Access firearms without adult supervision
10. Purchase fireworks
11. Get a tattoo without parental consent
12. Rent a hotel room
13. Purchase a lottery ticket
14. Rent a car
15. Pawn items

**Message:** Prosecuting 17-year-olds as adults leads to higher rates of unemployment, poverty and homelessness, because having an adult criminal record as a teen makes it significantly more difficult to get a job, obtain an education or secure housing.

**Message:** Without a place to live, an education or a job, people are put into a situation where they are more likely to commit crimes again. Because of these and other lifelong, harmful consequences, prosecuting 17-year-olds as adults increases the likelihood of recidivism.

**Message:** Community-based programs have proven more effective at rehabilitating youth, but are only available in juvenile court system. These programs are much cheaper than sending someone to prison.

**Message:** It is time to reexamine how the state treats many of its teens because this policy hurts Michigan’s economic growth, negatively impacts communities, threatens public safety, and wastes taxpayer money.
SEVEN ESSENTIAL RULES FOR DELIVERING A MESSAGE

Regardless of the situation you find yourself in, there are seven essential rules to effectively communicate your message. Keep these rules in mind whether you are speaking to a large group or just to an individual.

1. **Passion:** You must speak with real passion if you want to get and hold the attention of your audience. Believe in what you want to say and say it with great conviction. Remember, if you lack passion for your subject, how will you interest anyone else?

2. **Know your audience:** Have a good idea of what interests your audience be it a school board, legislator or community members. This is vital to making a good presentation. You can do everything else well, but if what you are saying is irrelevant to them, you will not be effective. Be sure to demonstrate how the issue you represent affects them, their constituency and their district. Do your homework. Do not underestimate the power of a 10-minute Google search. Devoting just a few minutes to some basic research on your audience can go a long way.

3. **Know your topic:** Knowing your topic is akin to knowing your audience; you are there because of your passion and knowledge of the issue. Be sure to have briefing materials and talking points on hand during the meeting.

4. **Explain what is at stake:** Spell out in very specific terms what you want to do and what will happen if it isn't done. Explain why your issue is important by demonstrating the alternative in strong terms. Use convincing facts and figures to support your position.

5. **Put a human face on it:** A great way to speak passionately is to give an example of how your issue has affected and will affect real people- maybe even you.

6. **Keep the big picture in mind:** Knowing your issue is the first step, but to really connect with the audience you must keep your topic in perspective with what is happening in the law maker's specific district. Adding this perspective makes the topic current and critical. Give your listener that perspective and they are more likely to understand the importance of your message.

7. **Empower the audience:** Give your listeners an opportunity to get on board and get involved. You've captivated them with your passion and shared your knowledge of the issue; now don't let them off the hook. Before you finish, make sure you have their buy-in. Give them a specific opportunity to commit to take some action to advance your goal and they will become a powerful advocate.
DOS AND DON’TS

DO: Lead with core value statements about safety, fairness and cost effectiveness.
DON’T: Lead with statistics that lack context or grounding in core values.

DO: Offer concrete examples of why alternatives are better, including how much money will be saved and how public safety will benefit.
DON’T: Say we should Raise the Age without making the point that there are better, more cost effective alternatives.

DO: Take an “and” approach to Raising the Age of juvenile jurisdiction. Acknowledge public safety concerns and link reforms to increased public safety and rehabilitation. Remind audiences that we don’t have to sacrifice safety to be more fair and cost effective, and how Raising the Age will reduce rates of recidivism therefore increasing public safety.
DON’T: Say that we must balance the need for public safety against the need for fairness. This is not a zero-sum equation. In this case, more fairness equates to more safety.

DO: Give examples from other states (particularly conservative states) that have a higher age of adult imprisonment than Michigan – e.g. Mississippi, Alabama, and Arizona. Utilize our “Fast Facts” sheet on page 5.
DON’T: Expect that audiences will take your word for it without evidence to back up your point.

DO: Use real life stories when possible. If you do not have a personal example to use you can refer to the profile, we included in the toolkit on page 26.
DON’T: Forget to put a face on the issue!
MEDIA ARCHIVE

Radio
- WKAR: Former juvenile inmate's story highlights justice system flaws (April 2015)
- WKAR: Report denounces 'outdated' juvenile justice laws (June 2014)
- Michigan Radio: Reform group calls for end to 'adult-time-for-adult-crime' (June 2014)
- WDET: Juvenile Incarceration: Michigan Is One Of 10 States that Considers 17-Year-Olds Adults (June 2014)

Print
- ALEC: The Importance of Raising the Age of Criminal Responsibility (June 2017)
- WLNS: Bill calls to change adult prosecution age from 17 to 18 in Michigan (June 2017)
- Bridge Magazine: A 17-year-old is not an adult, and shouldn't be treated as such. Even felons. (May 2017)
- PR Newswire: New Report Highlights Shift in Policy to "Raise The Age" of Juvenile Court Jurisdiction (March 2017)
- Detroit Free Press: Lawsuit tossed alleging rape of juveniles in adult prisons (August 2015)
- Detroit News: Juvenile prisoners allege rape, abuse (April 2015) (speaks to 17 y/o's in system, but more about lawsuit)
- The Atlantic: Rape in the American Prison (Feb. 2015)(mostly about lawsuit, speaks to 17yo's in the system)
- Battle Creek Enquirer: Group Advocates for Juvenile Law Changes (Oct. 2014)
- Battle Creek Enquirer: Editorial: Join effort to reform juvenile justice (Sept. 2014)
- Ann Arbor Independent: Prosecuting Teens As Adults—Prosecutor Mackie Says Hands Are Tied (July 2014)
- Huffington Post: ‘Antiquated’ Laws Funnel Kids Into Adult Prisons (June 2014)
- Youth Today: Exploring the Impact of Prosecuting and Incarcerating Kids in Michigan’s Criminal Justice System (June 2014)
- Detroit News: Adult Charges for Michigan Teens Criticized (June 2014)
- Mlive: Is Michigan’s criminal system, one that prosecutes teens as adults, wasting 20,000 lives and at what expense? (June 2014)(repost of Roelofs’ Bridge article)
- Bridge Magazine: Is Michigan wasting 20,000 teen lives – and at great expense? (June 2014)
- Battle Creek Enquirer: Editorial – Kids don’t belong in adult criminal justice system (June 2014)
- Bridge Magazine: A program to give young offenders a second chance is sending many to prison (April 2014)

Television
- MINBC: New Youth Behind Bars report examines incarcerating and prosecuting kids (June 2014) (AP Press)
- WLUC Fox UP: Study looks at minors charged as adults in Michigan (June 2014)(AP Press)
- WLIX Lansing: Report Finds Consequences to Charging Teens as Adults (June 2014)
- WJBK Fox Detroit: Let it Rip Weekend Edition (June 2014)

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STRATEGIES FOR ADVOCACY
WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO HELP RAISE THE AGE

1. **Learn More and Take Action.** Get the facts you need. Uncover the truth about the conditions of youth being held in adult prisons and become an advocate for change. The toolkit provides a fact sheet, talking points, and other info you need to make compelling arguments. Utilize these tools.

2. **Call & Write Your Legislators to Help Raise the Age.** We have provided a sample letter to a legislator in this toolkit for you. You can send it as-is or edit to make it your own. You will find contact information for your state Senator at [www.senate.mi.gov](http://www.senate.mi.gov) and your State Representative at [www.house.mi.gov](http://www.house.mi.gov).

3. **Write a Letter to the Editor or an Op-Ed.** We’ve provided tips for writing letters to the editor that you can use to write to your local newspaper and be an opinion leader in your local community. There are also sample letters to the editor that you can use as-is or tailor to make your own, or share to submit your story if you were convicted as an adult at age 17.

4. **Organize an Event At Your School, Place of Worship, Organization, or Home.** Present your guests with information about Raising the Age in Michigan. Conduct a presentation on Raising the Age that utilizes the information in this toolkit. Contact us if you would like an ACLU, MLPP or MCCD member to speak at your event. Contact information can be found on page 27.

5. **Organize In-District Meetings With Your Elected Officials.** Legislators often make themselves available to community members in their districts. Use this as a chance to talk to them about Raising the Age. The toolkit includes tips organizing an in-district meeting with your elected officials.

6. **Spread The Word About #RaiseTheAge Via Social Media.** We have attached a social media outreach page and a reading list with various articles about youth that have been incarcerated in adult prisons that you can share on social media to empower those voices and create change.

7. **Make a Statement and Encourage Others.** Endorse the Statement of Principles on page 30, and encourage organizations, business leaders, those in the faith community and others to do the same. Submit your story at [www.RaiseTheAgeMI.org](http://www.RaiseTheAgeMI.org) if you were convicted as an adult at age 17 and encourage others you know to as well.

8. **Join the ACLU, MCCD and MLPP’s Online Movement.** The ACLU, MCCD and MLPP are all over the web and we want to connect to you! Follow our Twitter feeds @ACLUofMichigan, @JusticeInMI, and @MichLeague; read, link to, and comment on Blogs ([http://aclumich.org/blog](http://aclumich.org/blog)); or become a fan of the ACLU of Michigan, MCCD, and MLPP on Facebook.

9. **Sign Up For Action Alerts about ACLU, MCCD and MLPP News and Events.** Go to ACLU’s [http://aclumich.org/action-center](http://aclumich.org/action-center), MCCD’s [www.miccd.org](http://www.miccd.org), and Michigan League for Public Policy’s [www.mlpp.org](http://www.mlpp.org) networks to join other advocates, which allows you to keep up to date with the latest news, events, and opportunities to protect our most fundamental freedoms.
KNOW YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

When spreading awareness for the Raise the Age campaign it essential that you know your target audiences’ priorities. Creating a win-win situation is essential to making change happen. The best scenario in politics is when justice is served, and everyone comes out looking good.

Utilizing the Dos and Don’ts resource page (p. 9) figure out which talking points to emphasize when you are working to frame your opposition positively. Saving tax dollars is a foolproof way to make any legislature look like a hero to their constituents.

Currently in Michigan, and across the United States, there is a push to halt mass incarceration and reduce the money that wastefully flows into the criminal justice system as a result. The State’s recently created Criminal Justice Policy Commission is tasked with reducing money spent on prisons in Michigan. Let your legislators know that Raising the Age is a key piece of this puzzle.

Research demonstrates that convicting and sentencing youth in the adult criminal justice system increases the likelihood they will reoffend, as compared with youth served in the juvenile system. This means that Raising the Age will reduce the number of reoffenders, thereby reducing tax dollars spent on incarceration.

Saving tax dollars is just one point though. Figure out what your legislator or audience care about and utilize other points that are relevant to their interests and core values.

You also need to cater your message to the size of audience you address and the type of audience. This will help determine how you communicate and what types of messages you will want to highlight. Some of the types of audiences you may need to craft messages for during your advocacy work include:

- Lawmakers
- Grassroots Allies
- Law Enforcement
- Judges
- Crime Victims
- Other Advocates

Further guidance on interacting with your target audience and tools you will need to engage them can be found in the following pages.
LOBBYING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

From your local school board to your senators and representatives in Washington, meeting with your elected officials about civil liberties issues is a lot easier than most people think. A personal visit is more effective than calls or emails and allows you to extend a personal ask for them to take action on that issue you care about. Remember, your elected officials work for you!

What is a lobby visit? A lobby visit is merely a meeting with your school board member, state senator, or other elected official where you share your views on an issue and encourage them to take action on that issue.

Where can you meet? It is not necessary to meet in a formal office or travel to Lansing or to Washington to meet with your legislator. Elected officials are usually happy to meet at a local coffee shop or library, and often have offices in their respective districts, and often list events online that they organize periodically for this very purpose. Calling a legislator’s office is the fastest way to set up a meeting, either in Lansing or in their home district. Contact information for Michigan State Senators can be found at http://www.senate.michigan.gov/senatorinfo_complete.html. Contact information for Michigan State Representatives can be found at http://www.house.mi.gov/mhrpublic/.

Here are some guiding principles to make your visit with your elected official a productive experience.

Prepare For Your Meeting:

- **Do your homework.** Make sure you know the issue you plan to discuss. Determine your strongest and most important messaging points, and try to think of personal or local examples to support those points. If you are meeting about a specific bill(s), know the bill number(s).

- **Know your legislator and staff person.** Have a good idea of what interests your legislator has in your issue. This is vital to making a good presentation. You can do everything else well, but if what you’re saying is irrelevant to them, you will not be effective. Be sure to demonstrate how the issue you represent affects them, their constituency and their district.

- **Plan out your meeting.** Your official will have limited time. If others are joining you be sure to identify who will speak on each issue and who will take notes.

- **Decide who will attend the meeting.** Are you meeting 1-on-1 or are you bringing someone with you? If you add others try to pick someone who is either known to the elected official, most knowledgeable on the issues, or otherwise best able to state your case. Keep it small, as a group of four or five people can be hard to manage.

- **Be aware of the goal.** What is it you want your elected official to do – vote for or against the bill? Make a commitment to introduce or co-sponsor legislation? Be sure to stay focused on the goal for the meeting.

- **Be Prompt.** Always be on time, even though you may have to wait for your elected official to return from meetings, or with legislators, an extended session on the floor of the House or Senate.
During the Meeting:

- **Be prompt and patient.** Elected officials run on very tight schedules. Be sure to show up on time for your appointment, and be patient – it is not uncommon for legislators and staff to be late or to have your meeting interrupted by other business.

- **Introduce yourselves.** At the start of the meeting, you and each participant should briefly introduce his/herself. If you are a constituent, it is important to make that clear. Be sure to bring up any other connections, such as memberships in the same groups, common friends, or previous meetings. You can also thank the legislator for previous votes or actions that you supported.

- **Do not ignore staff.** Many staff members are very influential with their bosses and can be of great help in relaying inside information and influencing a legislator so engage them during your time there. Find out which staff person handles your particular issue.

- **Keep it short and focused!** You will likely have 20 minutes or less with a staff person, and as little as 10 minutes if you meet with your elected official. Make the most of that brief time by sticking to your topic. Prioritize your issues beforehand in case you need to cut the meeting short and won’t be able to cover everything you planned to.

- **Speak with passion.** Believe in what you say, and say it respectfully and with conviction.

- **Provide personal and local examples of the impact of the policy or issue.** Be sure to demonstrate how the issue affects, or will affect, real people, the elected official his/her constituency, and his/her district or state.

- **Saying “I don’t know” can be a smart political move.** It is fine to tell the elected official/staff that you will get that information for him or her. Never make up an answer to a question—giving wrong or inaccurate information can seriously damage your credibility!

- **Always be respectful.** If you are talking about an issue about which you and your elected official disagree, it is easy to get frustrated. But, keep your cool. Listen to his/her concerns. Don’t argue, but if appropriate explain or clarify your position. There may still be an ask, such as asking him/her to allow a bill or policy to be debated. An elected official with whom you disagree on one issue may be the champion on another issue you support, so it is important not to alienate him/her.

- **Be specific. Ask for what you want.** Tell the elected official exactly what you would like them to do – e.g. sponsor legislation, push for a committee hearing for a policy amendment or bill you support, write a letter to a committee chair, vote a certain way on a bill, etc. After making the ask, pause and give the legislator a chance to respond. Be open to an alternative commitment or to no commitment at all. It may be that he/she needs more information, so ask if there’s anything you can provide. A friendly legislator might also let you know what he/she is hearing from other legislators, provide an update, or help strategize.

- **Leave something in writing.** Leave a one-page review sheet setting forth your position so that elected officials or staff can refer to it. Make sure you leave all your contact information and the organization you are aligning with.

- **Set deadlines for a response.** Often if an elected official hasn’t taken a position on legislation, he/she will not commit to one in the middle of a meeting. Ask when you should
check back in to find out what your official intends to do about your request.

**After the Meeting:**

- **Compare notes.** Right after the meeting, briefly compare notes with everyone in your group. Make sure you are on the same page about what the legislator committed to do and what follow up information you committed to send.

- **Report back.** Document the results of your meeting and arrange time to report that information to the lead organization with whom you are working.

- **Say thanks and follow-up.** Each person who took part in the meeting should promptly send a personal thank you note to the elected official, even if the legislator did not ultimately share your views. You should summarize any understandings that might have been reached. This also provides the opportunity to send any requested follow-up materials or information.

- **Be persistent with follow-up deadlines.** If your elected official doesn’t get back to you by the deadline you set during your meeting, contact his/her office and set a new deadline. Be flexible but persistent!

- **Sign up with Michigan Legislative website.** MILeg helps you track bills and keeps you informed of activities in House or Senate Committee meetings as well as individual Senators and Representatives in Michigan.

**Building From the Meeting:**

- **Publicize your issue.** Take advantage of media to get your message out to the public. Letters to the editor can be a powerful way to educate the community on important issues, particularly when sent as part of a strategic campaign.

- **Support your elected official.** If you elected official(s) are outspoken on your issue reference their support in your letter or digital communication.

- **Keep your letters short and effective.** A short letter, fewer than 200 words, is less likely to be edited and more likely to be read. Always include your full name, address and daytime telephone number for confirmation purposes. Submit your letter at least 3-5 days in advance of when you hope to have the letter appear. Be aware that most papers have a policy regarding frequency of submission, usually no more than one letter per month.

- **Use your social media tools.** You should also use your online network to get out your message by encouraging all your Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other connections to help spread awareness of your position on an issue, know where your elected officials stand, to recognize or thank your them, and to get them to push for policy change.

_Good luck! Remember that your elected officials work for you. Also remember that elected officials face multiple issues each election cycle, and it is likely that you know more information about your issue than your legislator does._
HOW TO ORGANIZE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Understand Your Community:

- You should know the members of your local administration and how decisions are made. You may be able to access this information online or by contacting the administration of that local public office or by establishing relationships with current or former elected officials.
- Collect information about the elected officials in office in your city, city council, school board, county commission and other public bodies. Get informed about which members of the public body you are targeting are most concerned about your issues and may be willing to support, if not sponsor, the policy you are advocating for. (Or, who are with you in opposition, if that is the case) Also, figure out what people or groups have leverage with the elected officials in question who may not initially lend support for policy you want to change.
- Identify the organizations and activists in your community that may be particularly interested in joining the policy effort. Then figure out what resources they have to offer and how involved they might be in helping you get your policy changed, or stop a policy from changing.
- **TIP:** Stay organized by keeping records of your contacts. This information will help you effectively manage the coalition building process.

Build a Coalition:

- Identify organizations in your community that may wish to work on the policy effort. Remember you can and should draw on a broad array of organizations to support.
- Send a letter to the organizations that may be interested in working on this project. Remember to include a draft of the policy you want to change (drafts of bills, resolutions, school policies, etc.) with your letter as a starting point for your discussion.
- **TIP:** The coalition you assemble should be balanced and representative of the diversity in your community. Remember that having other organizations’ and activists’ support for binding language will be essential if you want a strong policy or law to be passed. And know that building a strong, broad grassroots coalition will create a lasting defense against civil liberty and civil rights abuses in your community that will continue after the law or policy is changed.

Host an Organizing Meeting:

- Having discussed the initiative individually with some of your key organizational partners, you should convene a coalition meeting to discuss this project as a group.
- Establish roles and responsibilities for leadership.
- **TIP:** You may want to involve sympathetic elected officials (legislative committee persons, city council members, school board members, etc.) in the process.
Build Public Awareness:

- Start a letter writing campaign, draft an op-ed piece in the local newspaper, engage in a public petition drive, or set-up information tables in public places.
- Leverage your social media networks and those of your friends. Remember to create messaging that your virtual connections can easily share through various channels like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Use short messages, captivating images, and short video that take advantage the strengths of each social media tool. In addition, with your coalition partners, organize 'teach-ins' with your members and/or forums with the general public invited.
- **TIP:** Any information given to the public needs to be accurate and concise.

Implement a Strategy for Passing the Law or Policy:

- Schedule informal meeting(s) with your local elected officials. Present evidence of public support. Identify the most persuasive elected official(s) to introduce the policy or bill to their constituency or to other members of their respective public body.
- Have influential people or groups call or visit members that need to be moved to support the policy change.
- Identify key people to testify in support of the policy you want to change at the meeting when public officials will be debating in support or opposition.
- **TIP:** Members of the coalition should be prepared to attend meetings of the local council, board or other public body and testify publicly on behalf of the resolution. And remember to keep the media informed about your activities, about how public officials vote and certainly about your success!

**CONGRATULATIONS, YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY!!**
TOOLS FOR ADVOCACY
TIPS ON WRITING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Now that you have become more informed about the Raise the Age issue and the various activities in which you might get involved, here are a few templates and tools you can use to support your advocacy work.

After you write letters to your state legislators and/or judges, letters to the editor are great advocacy tools. These letters:

- Reach a large audience.
- Are often monitored by elected officials.
- Address information not covered in a news article.
- Create an impression of widespread support or opposition to an issue.

Keep it short and on one subject. Many newspapers have strict limits on the length of letters and have limited space to publish them. Keeping your letter brief will help assure that your important points are not cut out by the newspaper.

Make it legible. Your letter doesn't have to be fancy, but you should use type it if your handwriting may be difficult to read.

Send letters to weekly community newspapers too. The smaller the newspaper's circulation, the easier it is to get your letter printed.

Be sure to include your contact information. Many newspapers will only print a letter to the editor after calling the author to verify his or her identity and address. Newspapers will not give out that information, and will usually only print your name and city should your letter be published.

Make references to the newspaper. While some papers print general commentary, many will only print letters that refer to a specific article. Here are some examples of easy ways to refer to articles in your opening sentence:

- I was disappointed to see that The Post's May 18 editorial "Michigan Tough On Crime" omitted key perspectives from the debate.
- I strongly disagree with (author's name)'s narrow view on youth being prosecuted as adults. ("Name of Op-Ed," date)
- I am deeply saddened to read that Congressman Doe does not acknowledge how prosecuting 17-year-olds as adults actually lowers public safety. ("Title of Article," date)

If you get published, please inform our communications team by emailing: ddawsey@aclumich.org and ebrennan@miccd.org
SAMPLE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Before you decide on a letter to the editor carefully consider the audience to which you are communicating and whether the messaging you are using will resonate with those readers effectively. These sample letters provide templates you can tailor to fit your narrative and target audience as appropriate.

SAMPLE #1
To The Editor:

It is time our state legislature deals with the reality that Michigan over-criminalizes youth by prosecuting them as adults. Michigan is one of only five states in the country that automatically prosecute 17-year-olds as adults for criminal offenses. Youth are prohibited from accessing rehabilitative services only available in the juvenile justice system, such as education, family services, and age-appropriate mental health and substance abuse treatment. Research demonstrates that convicting and sentencing youth in the adult criminal justice system increases, rather than decreases the likelihood they will reoffend, when compared to their counterparts in the juvenile system. Raising the age to 18 will increase public safety by lowering the recidivism rate while freeing up tax dollars to be spent elsewhere.

Denying resources to youths while in the correctional system can be detrimental to them for the rest of their life. Jobs, housing, and other resources are substantially more difficult to obtain for individuals with adult felony records. It is time for Michigan to get smart on crime by raising the age to 18 for adult prosecution. This will increase public safety by reducing the population of reoffenders while saving our tax dollars. The time is now to Raise the Age.

Sincerely,

[YOUR NAME]

SAMPLE #2
To The Editor:

Across the nation, issues regarding both overt and sublime institutional racism are more and more prevalent in mainstream media. What has become increasingly clear here in Michigan is that policies aimed at being “tough on crime” may amount to institutional racism.

For example, Michigan’s policy of automatically prosecuting youth as adults disproportionately impacts youth of color, particularly blacks and Hispanics. Michigan is one of six states that automatically prosecute 17-year-olds as adults. Youth of color represent 23% of the statewide population but they account for 53% of those entering the criminal justice system at age 17. Of these youth, the majority were prosecuted for nonviolent offenses that did not involve a weapon.

The Michigan legislature needs to step up and Raise the Age to 18. These laws disproportionately criminalize youth of color. It is time to Raise the Age of adult prosecution.

Sincerely,

[YOUR NAME]

SAMPLE #3
To The Editor:

Unfortunately, in Michigan, 17-year-olds are automatically prosecuted as adults for criminal offenses. Forty-five other states have set their age of criminal responsibility at 18 for good reason. Setting the age at 17 puts more youth in adult prisons where age-appropriate resources are not as available as they are in the juvenile system. According to Raise the Age Michigan campaign, because these 17 year olds often cannot get the help they need while in adult prison, they are more likely to reoffend, compared to their counterparts who serve time in the juvenile system. This threatens public safety and wastes tax dollars.

It is time for Michigan to Raise the Age to 18-year-olds to receive appropriate resources while incarcerated so when they return to our community, they are better equipped to succeed and less likely to reoffend. This will help create fundamental opportunities for these individuals, while keeping our communities safe, and saving valuable tax dollars. It is time we get smart on crime.

Sincerely,
[YOUR NAME]
SAMPLE STATE LEGISLATOR LETTER:

[Date]

The Honorable [Insert Name]
Michigan [House of Representatives or Senate]
House: P.O. Box 30014 <or> Senate: PO Box 30036
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear [Representative or Senator and Last Name],

I am writing as a [constituent, community member, ACLU branch member, concerned citizen, etc.] to urge you to consider changes in state laws that determine what age youth are prosecuted as adults. Only one of five U.S. states to do so, Michigan automatically prosecutes 17-year-olds as adults. Lawmakers should raise the age of adult prosecution to 18, which would align our state with 45 others across the nation that use that age.

Governor Snyder stated he wants to take part in smart criminal justice reform. He created a Criminal Justice Policy Commission tasked with lowering the cost of our criminal justice system. Raising the Age can be a vital piece of that puzzle.

Research demonstrates that sentencing youth in the adult criminal justice system increases the likelihood they will reoffend when compared with youth serving in the juvenile system. Raising the age to 18 allows youth to receive the resources they need while in the juvenile system that will allow them to have an easier reentry into society. They do not get that support while in prison. As a result, youth exiting the adult system are 34% more likely to reoffend compared to youth in the juvenile system. Giving more youth access to the reentry services provided in the juvenile system will reduce recidivism rates, increasing public safety and allowing more public tax dollars to be spent elsewhere.

I implore you to amend the sections of law needed to address this issue so that we can be smarter on crime. I appreciate your time and consideration. Thank you.

Sincerely,

[Name]
[Title]
SAMPLE LETTER TO A JUDGE

[Date]

The Honorable [Insert Name]
Judge of the [name of court]
[Insert city], MI [insert zip code]

Dear [Judge XXX],

I am writing as a [constituent, or concerned citizen] to encourage your support for raising the age of adult prosecution of juveniles to 18. As you know, Michigan is one of only five states that automatically prosecute 17-year-olds as adults. This policy is a remnant of the “tough on crime” movement of decades ago that now needs to be revisited. As your constituent, I urge you to advocate for Michigan to become smart on crime. Raising the age of adult prosecution to 18-years-old would align Michigan with 45 other states that have taken similar measures and seen reductions in recidivism, prison rates, and expenses related to crime and corrections.

Governor Snyder stated that he wants smart criminal justice reform for Michigan, creating a Criminal Justice Policy Commission tasked with cutting the costs associated with locking too many people up for too long. Raising the age of adult prosecution would be a vital piece of that puzzle.

Research demonstrates that convicting and sentencing youth in the adult criminal justice system increases the likelihood they will reoffend when compared with youth served in the juvenile system. Raising the age to 18 will allow youth to receive the resources they need while in the juvenile system that will allow them to have an easier reentry into society. Compared to youth in the juvenile system, youth exiting the adult system are far more likely to reoffend. Age appropriate resources in the juvenile system will lead to lower and increased public safety, while free up tax dollars that can be spent elsewhere.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

[Name]
[Title]
#RaiseTheAgeMI SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN TIPS

Today, you can find a connection to almost everyone through one social media platform or another, including elected officials, community activists, reporters, and family members. Because of social media’s wide reach, it is a great place to start the conversation about raising the age in Michigan. Whether you are tweeting, blogging, or posting you can utilize the hashtag #RaiseTheAgeMI so others can see what you are saying. While utilizing social media, update your accounts frequently, but not constantly. Followers tune out and ultimately unfollow accounts that don’t generate much content or that clutter up their feed.

**Sample Tweets**

- It is time for MI Legislature to step up and #RaiseTheAgeMI, stop putting youth at a heightened risk of violence and sexual abuse in prison.

- #RaiseTheAgeMI will reduce recidivism and save tax dollars. Let incarcerated youth receive the resources they need.

- Adult prison is no place for 17-year-olds. It is time to #RaiseTheAgeMI

- Michigan is one of only 5 states that automatically prosecute 17-year-olds as adults. #RaiseTheAgeMI

*Articles in our Media Archive can be a great source to support your tweets with tweets like these:


- Michigan is one of six states that automatically prosecute 17-year-olds as adults. #RaiseTheAge [http://www.bridgemi.com/guest-commentary/17-year-old-not-adult-and-shouldnt-be-treated-such-even-felons](http://www.bridgemi.com/guest-commentary/17-year-old-not-adult-and-shouldnt-be-treated-such-even-felons)

- Roughly 20,000 teens have been prosecuted as adults in Michigan in the past decade. #RaiseTheAgeMI [http://www.mlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2014/06/is_michigan_wasting_20000_teen.html](http://www.mlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2014/06/is_michigan_wasting_20000_teen.html)
SAMPLE STORIES

Story Number 1 – Jamie Rykse

Jamie Rykse considers herself lucky. She lives in her own home and works full-time as a GED and literacy educator in Grand Rapids. She grew up impoverished, raised by drug-addicted parents in the city. By the age of 14, she survived a gunshot wound to the leg, was sexually assaulted, and was homeless, living by herself on the streets. By 17, Jamie had been arrested, convicted, and was headed to prison.

“When the bus came to get me, when it was time to go, I started crying,” Jamie recalls. “I was being sent to prison to be housed with murderers.”

Since she was only 17 at the time, she was placed in solitary confinement for her own protection, which meant she remained in a cell alone for 20 hours a day. Jamie saw little in the way of rehabilitative programming for youth during her time at both Scott Correctional Facility and Western Wayne Correctional Facility. Because of her experience, Jamie is adamant that youth should not be in adult prisons. “Youth do not belong in the adult system, they belong in a youthful system where they can get the rehabilitative services they need.”

In the past decade about 20,000 17-year-olds spent time in Michigan’s adult prison system. Like Jamie, most of them had prior criminal records, but many also experienced some type of trauma, significant loss, or abuse in their short lifetime. Jamie believes the juvenile justice system needs reforming to ensure that young people receive community-based interventions if possible, or age-appropriate confinement if necessary.

“I was lucky enough to find my own support system after being released, but a lot of girls aren’t as lucky,” Jamie says.

Story Number 2 – T.J. Parsell

T. J. Parsell entered Michigan’s adult criminal justice system when he was just 17, for holding up a photo shop with a toy gun. Because of this self-described “stupid act”, T.J. was convicted as an adult and sentenced to prison.

A tall but skinny teenager (148 pounds), like many youth in adult prisons, T.J. was immediately targeted by adult inmates upon his arrival. Within the first 24 hours of his incarceration, he was drugged and gang raped by a group of older men – a pattern of abuse that continued throughout his four-year prison sentence. Some 30 years after his incarceration, T.J. says he is still dealing with the trauma he experienced as a youth in adult prison.

Now a successful author, film maker, and human rights activist, T.J. works to ensure that youth sentenced to adult prisons are treated humanely and in accordance with their youthful status by fighting for stronger protections against prison abuse and rape, and efforts to remove youth from adult correctional facilities.

Additional stories are available at www.RaiseTheAgeMI.org
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
ADDENDUM A - Summary of Pending Youth in Prison Legislation

1. **(HB 4607, 4653, 4662, 4664, 4676, 4659, 4685)** Increase the maximum age of juvenile court jurisdiction from 17 to 18. Michigan is one of only five remaining states in the United States where 17-year-olds are automatically considered adults for criminal offenses. To align with standard national practices, Michigan should raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 18.

2. **(HB 4789)** Establish funding to ensure that 17-year-olds can access services available in the juvenile justice system. Juvenile court services are funded primarily from the DHHS Child Care Fund (CCF), a 50% cost-share between the counties and state. This legislation would establish that the Department of Health Human Services would pay 100% of the expenses above the amount determined in a study commissioned by the legislature, to be the benchmark amount annually expended by the counties to provide juvenile justice services to 17-year-olds.

3. **(HB 4744)** Prohibit the placement of youth under 18 in adult jails and prisons and provide access to age-appropriate rehabilitation. Youth placed in adult jails and prisons are more likely to experience physical and sexual violence, isolation and self-harm. Compared to prison, Michigan’s public and private juvenile facilities – many of which already serve youth with adult convictions - can provide age/developmentally appropriate treatment that is more effective in rehabilitating youth.

4. **(HB 4753)** Omit three offenses that do not require adult sentencing from the list of Specified Juvenile Offenses. Michigan is one of only 15 states that allows automatic waiver, in which a prosecutor can bypass the juvenile court altogether and directly file a case in adult criminal court if a youth is charged with one of 18 “specified offenses.” This legislation removes three specified offenses that do not require adult sentencing: bank/safe robbery, escape from a juvenile facility, and drug possession or delivery of more than 1000 grams. A youth accused of these offenses can still be tried as an adult, but it would not be mandatory.

5. **(HB 4675, 4793)** Require equal consideration of all mitigating factors prior to waiving jurisdiction in traditional juvenile waiver cases. When considering whether to waive a youth through traditional waiver methods, courts are required to weigh seriousness of the offense and prior delinquent history above all other factors. This legislation would allow the judge to equally consider other factors, including a youth’s culpability (level of involvement in planning or carrying out an offense), history of treatment participation, and availability of other dispositional options.

6. **(HB 4696)** Require public monitoring and oversight of youth under the jurisdiction of the MDOC who entered for an offense committed prior to turning 18 years old. Michigan does not currently require the courts or MDOC to report when youth are charged, convicted or sentenced in the adult criminal justice system. This legislation would require that the State Court Administrative Office report the number of youth charged as adults, demographic information, the offense, sentenced received, and the recidivism rate of youth with adult convictions.

7. **(HB 4741)** Ensure age-appropriate programming and outdoor exercise for youth under 21-years-old in administrative segregation in prison. Segregation can cause extreme psychological, physical, and developmental harm, particularly among youth and those with disabilities or histories of trauma and abuse. In line with current Michigan Mental Heath Code, this legislation ensures that youth in administrative segregation have access to age-appropriate out-of-cell programming and outdoor exercise at least five days a week.

8. **(HB 4677 - 4678)** Establish a family advisory board within the MDOC to ensure effective partnerships with families and victims. It is well documented that a connection to family while in prison results in fewer misconducts and reduces recidivism. The legislation creates a Family Advisory Board, housed within the Michigan Department of Corrections, to advise on strategies to improve family connection, reduce misconduct and achieve successful reentry.
ADDENDUM B- Raise the Age MI: Statement of Principles

Individuals and organizations are encouraged to endorse the statement at www.RaisetheAgeMI.org

WHEREAS:
1. Children are our most vital and valuable resource and investing in each of them is investing in our collective future; and

2. Research should inform policy and practices; and

3. Youth are developmentally different from adults and these differences are documented by research on the adolescent brain and acknowledged by many state and federal laws that treat youth disparately based upon their age and stage of development; and

4. Mistakes often associated with normative adolescent behavior should not determine a youth’s outcome in life; and

5. The Michigan adult criminal justice system is not structured to handle the developmental, educational or social needs of children; and

6. Most youth in Michigan’s adult criminal justice system are there for non-violent offenses; and

7. Research demonstrates that convicting and sentencing youth in the adult criminal justice system increases rather than decreases the likelihood they will reoffend, as compared with youth served in the juvenile system; and

8. Youth in adult prisons face extreme risk of violence, sexual assault, and self-harm; and

9. The juvenile justice system provides the developmentally-appropriate programs, services, monitoring, and sanctions that can help parents nurture and guide young people as they grow into productive adult citizens; then

We believe Michigan’s policy-makers, communities, advocates and government systems should work to:

A. Raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction to 18, which would impact 95% of the children being convicted and sentenced as adults, and align Michigan with 41 other states, federal standards, and U.S. Supreme Court rulings.

B. Remove all youth under age 18 from adult jails and prisons and provide access to developmentally appropriate, rehabilitative services available in youth-serving community-based programs, and juvenile facilities (when out-of-home placement is necessary).

C. Continue to build a juvenile justice system that offers age-appropriate treatment and services, therapy, education, job skills training, and further enhance the system to support and promote evidence-based programs.

D. Fully fund effective community-based programs that support court-involved youth and their families.
The Raise the Age MI Campaign is a collaborative of hundreds of agencies, organizations, and individuals who are committed to improving outcomes for young people across our state. We appreciate their commitment and support of this important work.

You can find the extensive list of individual and organizational supporters at:

www.RaiseTheAgeMI.org
1 MCCD, Youth Behind Bars: Examining the Impact of Prosecuting and Incarcerating Kids in Michigan’s Criminal Justice System, May 2014.


3 MCCD, Youth Behind Bars, supra note 1.


5 MCCD, Youth Behind Bars, supra note 1.


7 MCCD, Youth Behind Bars, supra note 1.