



Advocates Rally For Youth Justice Reform At Florida's Capitol

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - More than 100 youth justice advocates [rallied at Florida's Capitol today](#), encouraging legislators to support youth justice reforms and help children who are prosecuted as adults in Florida.

The rally was part of the No Place for a Child lobby day. [No Place for a Child](#) is a diverse, nonpartisan coalition committed to limiting and ultimately ending adult prosecutions of youth in Florida, where more children are prosecuted as adults for felonies than in any other state.

Marquis McKenzie was 15 years old when he was prosecuted as an adult. Despite the obstacles that created, he is now a successful business owner in Orange County who also mentors at-risk youth.

"We're just asking that the state of Florida would reform our system," McKenzie said. "I'm not saying we shouldn't be held accountable, but we should not be held accountable as adults when we are still juveniles."

A majority of children sent to Florida's adult criminal justice system are transferred at the sole discretion of prosecutors through a process known as "direct file." Florida is one of just 14 states that allow prosecutors to decide whether children should be held accountable in adult or juvenile court. Of those 14, Florida is one of only three states lacking the checks and balances of a due process hearing, in which a judge can review that decision.

Kim Lawrance's daughter, Taylor, is serving a 10-year prison sentence that will be followed by 10 years on probation. She was prosecuted as an adult in Polk County when she was 15.

"Taylor was once a straight A student and a competitive cheerleader. Now she's just a statistic serving time in an adult prison in Florida," Lawrance said. "Just 21 days after she was arrested, a prosecutor decided that Taylor should be tried as an adult. There was no input from a judge, no evaluations, and no interviews with teachers or jail staff. Instead, she was rebooked in the middle of the night, given a different color uniform and told she was no longer a juvenile. She'll be under correctional supervision until she is 35 years old and branded a felon for life. Now, she is being raised in the system."

Cherise Gordon spoke on behalf of her brother who was also direct filed.

"We need them to get the resources they need to be successful," Gordon said. "Institutionalizing them at a young age is not the way to do it."

The Legislature is considering a number of bills this year that would affect children in Florida's adult system. SB 876, HB 575, and HB 1293 would create a due process hearing before a judge in which a child can request a return to juvenile court. SB 850 and HB 339 would increase ages for children eligible for transfer and eliminate mandatory transfers. SB 870 would house children in juvenile facilities while awaiting trial in adult court.

Sen. Bobby Powell, D-West Palm Beach, is sponsoring the three senate bills.

"For the past six years, I have championed direct file reform in both chambers of the State Legislature and every year, despite our efforts, the state of Florida continues to unfairly prosecute hundreds of children as adults," Powell said. "I'm here to say that enough is enough. We are demanding long overdue reform to our direct file statute, including the elimination of mandatory file, elimination of discretionary direct file for 14- and 15-year old children, and establishing a 14-year old minimum age for indictments. Simply put, it's the right thing to do."

Rep. Ramon Alexander, D-Tallahassee, is sponsoring HB 339.

"We have juvenile courts for a reason and we have adult courts for a reason," Alexander said. "Juveniles should be tried in juvenile courts."

Rep. James Bush III, D-Miami, is sponsoring HB 575.

"It is time for us to stand up and speak up for our children," Bush said.