

Rep. Bowen, Sen. Johnson: Celebrate introduction of legislation to end juvenile “Life without parole” sentences in Wisconsin

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MILWAUKEE – In recognition of the introduction yesterday of LRB-4927 & LRB-5422, bipartisan legislation to end the practice of sentencing juveniles to life in prison without parole in Wisconsin, State Sen. LaTonya Johnson (D-Milwaukee) and State Rep. David Bowen (D-Milwaukee) released the following statement:

“Victims of crime and their communities deserve justice, especially in situations where there has been a tragic loss of life. But a child is also a terrible thing to waste, and there is no chance for redemption for a minor who has been sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. I am proud to join with a bipartisan group of legislators to co-author this bill to prohibit juvenile life without parole. Ending this unforgiving and wasteful sentencing practice will better align our criminal justice system with the goals of rehabilitation and redemption of offenders, and, ultimately, make it more just in the eyes of the community,” said Sen. Johnson.

“I am proud to stand today as a co-author of this important bipartisan piece of legislation banning juvenile life without parole sentences here in Wisconsin. Across the country, 25 states across the political spectrum and the District of Columbia have already banned this practice, and even the US Supreme Court has made it clear that these sentences run afoul of the 8th Amendment’s ‘cruel and unusual punishment’ clause. And while we recognize that the crimes at the heart of these sentences are undoubtedly serious, we must also recognize that they were committed by children whose brains were not yet fully developed, and no child is beyond redemption. After years of conversations with criminal justice advocates,

with individuals serving juvenile life without parole sentences themselves, and with the families of victims, it is more clear than ever to me that we must recognize that children – even those who have committed serious crimes – must have the opportunity to prove they have been rehabilitated after serving a certain amount of years in prison, with the ability to rejoin society as productive and reformed members,” added Rep. Bowen.

LRB-4927 & LRB-5422, introduced yesterday by State Reps. Todd Novak (R-Dodgeville) and John Spiros (R-Marshfield) alongside Rep. Bowen and Sen. Johnson, would ban Wisconsin courts from imposing life sentences without the possibility of release for juvenile offenders. The bill also establishes a set of mitigating factors a court must consider when sentencing juvenile offenders, and would also apply those factors retroactively when considering adjusting the sentences of juvenile offenders who are currently incarcerated. Under the bill, juvenile offenders would have the opportunity to have their sentences reviewed after serving 20 years of their sentence for homicide or certain sexual offenses or after 15 years for all other offenses. After that time period, courts would have the discretion to reduce or modify a juvenile offender’s sentence, and juvenile offenders whose sentence modification petitions are denied would be able to petition to have their sentence reviewed every three years. In recognition of the rights of victims, victims’ families would be notified regarding these proceedings and would be entitled to be involved in the sentence adjustment procedure.

“Now is the time to align our policies with Supreme Court precedent, with the science of juvenile brain development, and with what is morally right. With this bill, we can do just that.”