



Case Study of WCC's Raise the Age Policy and Advocacy Efforts

BACKGROUND

The Women's City Club of New York (WCC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, multi-issue activist organization that is dedicated to improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers. WCC works to shape public policy to promote responsive government through education, issue analysis, advocacy and civic participation. Now in its second century of service, WCC has focused its efforts to empowering women to become more civically engaged.

On April 10, 2017, Governor Cuomo signed "raise the age" into law in New York. By October 2019, New York State will no longer automatically prosecute all 16- and 17-year olds as adults.

Until this development, New York and North Carolina were the only two states in the country that failed to recognize what research and science have confirmed – adolescents are children, and prosecuting and placing them in the adult criminal justice system doesn't work for them and doesn't work for public safety.

The WCC Public Policy Committee was presented with a position paper on this issue that had been prepared by WCC members Susan Heitner and Roschel Holland Stearns. The paper strongly supported the results and recommendation of the panel of experts convened by Governor Cuomo to study this issue. The WCC paper cited the research of the commission's report, and was also based on the direct experience of the WCC members working in the juvenile justice system. The law needed to be changed so that 16 and 17 year old youths would be treated as juveniles in an age-appropriate way, which had been shown to decrease their own recidivism in the criminal justice system and actually increase public safety. The PPC Committee endorsed this position, as did the WCC board.

ACTIONS

The actions that followed the WCC endorsing the cause of "raising the age" included the following:

- The WCC joined the Raise the Age New York Coalition, whose original lead organizational members were the Correctional Association of New York, whose executive director headed the governor's commission, the Children's Defense Fund New York, and the Citizens' Committee for Children (CCC). It is currently headed by the latter two groups, and the membership has grown to 128 very varied organizations, including legal groups, social service agencies, civic groups, religious congregations, unions, etc.
- The WCC held a well-attended public program on February 25, 2016 at UJA-Federation of New York, "Youth and the NYS Criminal Justice System: Why Comprehensive Reform is Needed." The speakers included Venida Browder, mother of Kalief Browder, the young man who spent three years at Rikers Island, much of it in solitary confinement, for allegedly stealing a backpack at age 16. The charges were finally dropped but Kalief, who had also been beaten by a staff person, committed suicide a few years later. His mother became a spokesperson for the cause of raising the age, but she too has passed away. The other primary speakers were Soffiyah Elijah, Correctional Association, and Jennifer March from CCC.
- The Raise the Age New York Coalition held several lobby days in Albany in 2016 and 2017 where advocates from across the state convened and held individual meetings with many members of the Senate and Assembly. WCC staff and board members participated in both the 2016 and 2017 lobby days.
- Periodically the WCC would send out email blasts asking the membership to call certain key legislators as well as their own representatives on this issue, up until the law was passed in April 2017.

IMPACT

As already noted, a lengthy law passed in April, 2017 and its implementation is progressing. The Raise the Age New York Coalition remains intact, and WCC has already signed on to two letters to the Governor strongly advocating for adequate funds to properly implement the legislation.

On February 5, 2018, Mayor de Blasio made the case for more state funding, beginning with a request regarding Raise the Age funding, which he called an unfunded mandate. WCC members continue to follow the law's implementation,