

Republicans Modify Position on Juvenile Offender Legislation

by Hugh McQuaid | Mar 5, 2015 5:30am

CT News Junkie

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Sen. John Kissel

After stalling the passage of legislation to reassess lengthy prison sentences imposed on juvenile offenders during the last two legislative sessions, Senate Republicans backed a modified version of the bill during a Wednesday hearing.

“I think the third time’s going to be a charm for the passage of the juvenile reform bill,” Sen. John Kissel, ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee, said. “I think a lot of folks in this state will be happy to see it move forward.”

The committee held a public hearing Wednesday afternoon on two bills designed to align the state’s sentencing laws with a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions. The court found that young offenders are less culpable for their actions than their adult counterparts.

Both bills are based on recommendations from the state Sentencing Commission and require the state to provide an eventual hearing and a chance of parole for offenders serving lengthy prison terms for crimes they committed before they turned 18 years old.

Last year, a similar bill easily passed the House but died in the Senate, where Republicans said it went beyond complying with the court decisions. Republicans said the bill's supporters were unwilling to negotiate on the proposal and responded by filing a series of controversial amendments, which prompted Democratic Senate leaders to shelve the bill.

This year, Republicans say they have met with the Sentencing Commission and drafted their [own version of the bill](#). Their proposal includes some changes. For instance, it requires that a victim be notified when an offender's sentence is being reviewed.



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Sen. Len Fasano

Republicans are also seeking to make changes to the Earned Risk Reduction Credit Program, which allows prison inmates to earn time off their sentences by participating in state programming. The bill would make people convicted of manslaughter ineligible to participate in the program if the offender intended to cause harm, Senate Minority Leader Len Fasano said during the hearing.

It's uncertain whether Democrats in the legislature or Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's office will support changing the program. Republicans have been critical of the program since it was adopted in 2011 and Fasano said it required greater accountability during his Wednesday comments. But he was generally supportive of the program.

"I think people can be rehabilitated and I also believe, if people show the right energy, change their lives, they should receive credits for that," he said.

Andrew Clark, acting executive director of the Sentencing Commission, said the commission has not yet weighed in on the credit program but intended to look into the program at the request of the Senate Republicans. Clark said the commission was supportive of the other aspects of the Republican bill.

"They essentially mirror [the commission recommendations] and they have clarifying language that we agreed would help the proposal," he said.

Despite support from Senate Republicans, Clark was not ready Wednesday to celebrate the bill's passage. It has come close to passage several times only to expire on the Senate calendar. During one of those years, 2013, Kissel was widely [credited as the bill's primary opponent](#).

On Wednesday Kissel seemed confident it would pass this year.

"I see the final version having an extraordinarily high passage out of this committee and this legislature this year," Kissel said. ". . . I see Connecticut, although not adhering to the strictest of parameters, taking somewhat of a leadership role although within a range that is acceptable to myself and many of my colleagues on my side of the aisle. I think it's the best of all possible worlds."