

Velia Koppenhoefer message at juvenile lifer rally

Good afternoon. My name is Velia Koppenhoefer. I am the mother of Efren Paredes, Jr., the co-organizer of today's event and one of Michigan's 363 prisoners who were sentenced to life without parole when they were juveniles.

Efren has been incarcerated over 28 years since the age of 15. He was convicted in Berrien County in 1989 and has spent nearly twice the amount of time in prison than he lived in society as a teenage boy. He is now 44-years-old, a husband, and proud father.

As a parent, and 30-year employee in the public school system, I have learned the obvious truth that nearly all adults recognize and the U.S. Supreme Court has made clear: children are not adults and they have a tremendous capacity for change.

I have witnessed troubled, neglected, and abused kids who have had the unfortunate experience of encountering some of the most horrible and difficult experiences in life make positive changes.

No one disagrees that kids should be punished for breaking the law. But they should not be condemned to die in prison and denied the opportunity of receiving meaningful parole consideration their entire lives for mistakes they made before the age of maturity. No mistake defines a person their entire life. This is even more true in the case of juveniles who will undergo many changes throughout their lifetimes.

We are mindful and sympathetic to the painful loss suffered by victims and our communities. They deserve our compassion and understanding, and we all need to heal and work to become whole again by the grace of God. The solutions we are proposing are considerate of this and offer a reasonable balance for all sides. Juvenile offenders will still be punished and serve many years behind bars for their actions, and none of them will go unpunished.

Juvenile lifers have a return value to our communities. They deserve the opportunity to make better choices in life and return to society one day after they have changed their thinking and behavior, and the Parole Board determines they no longer pose a danger to society after careful evaluation.

The Parole Board safely releases thousands of adult offenders back to the community each year. Many of them have committed crimes just as serious as juvenile lifers. Juvenile offenders are equally deserving of the same opportunity for release consideration adult offenders routinely receive.

We are calling on prosecutors across the state to withdraw their motions to seek life without parole sentences for juvenile lifers again and to instead pursue term-of-year sentences for them.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that juvenile lifers should receive new sentences in 2012, over five years ago. Since that time only 19% of Michigan juvenile lifers have been

resentenced. Around 73 total according to the latest numbers available.

Prosecutors from Berrien, Genesee, Macomb, Oakland, and Saginaw counties are among those that have caused the most resentencing delays. Some counties, like Berrien County, have not resentenced a single juvenile lifer. The prosecutors are also disregarding the two landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions issued the past five years about resentencing juvenile lifers.

These counties are seeking life without parole sentences again for almost all the more than 100 juvenile lifers being resentenced again in their jurisdictions even though the high court stated that this extreme sentence must be rare, uncommon, and reserved only for those who are incapable of change.

In Wayne County, where we are gathered today, Prosecutor Kym Worthy is seeking life without parole sentences again for 40% of the 158 juvenile lifers in this county in violation of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling. Wayne County has convicted the largest number of juvenile lifers in the State of Michigan.

We are not asking prosecutors or judges to do any more than the nation's high court has ordered in this matter. We are simply asking them to follow the law. Providing term-of-year sentences to juvenile lifers and the opportunity for meaningful parole consideration is a sensible and humane solution that can bring resolution to the problem.

My family knows firsthand the painful impact that long-term incarceration can have on prisoners and their families. After nearly 30 years of imprisonment, Efren deserves to be resentenced and given the opportunity for meaningful parole consideration, as do the other juvenile lifers awaiting resentencing hearings.

Like Efren, many other juvenile lifers have done remarkable things with their lives and demonstrated the capacity for change. Unfortunately too many of their voices have been silenced by the walls that have held them captive for so long, and some have even been forgotten. We are here today to remind them that they are not forgotten and their cries for justice are being heard.

It is time for prosecutors to move the resentencing process along and stop delaying justice. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Justice delayed is justice denied."

Thank you.