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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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#### **VA CRIME COMMISSION TO HOLD HEARING TO DISCUSS TRYING CHILDREN AS ADULTS: ADVOCATES SAY NOW IS THE TIME FOR CHANGE**

*Richmond, VA* – In the midst of a year long study on Virginia's practice of trying and treating youth as adults, the Virginia State Crime Commission will meet on Thursday in Richmond to hear testimony from both national and local authorities on the practice of "transfer." This practice gives prosecutors discretion in many cases to try youth as young as 14 as adults. The current law in the Commonwealth of Virginia permits the incarceration of youth in adult jails and prisons.

The Commission will hear from Vincent P. Culotta, an expert in adolescent brain development, Rick Kern, the Executive Director of the Sentencing Commission, and Holly Boyle, a Crime Commission researcher conducting the study, which is expected to conclude this fall.

Advocates hope that the information provided at the hearing and by the study will prompt the legislators on the Commission to recommend reform. The advocates believe change is needed because the current system inappropriately limits Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court judges' role in deciding which youth are and are not tried as adults.

Andrew Block, Legal Director of the JustChildren Program at Legal Aid Justice Center in Charlottesville said, "When legislators created our current system they all but removed the Juvenile Court judges from the equation. Now, most of the decisions about who gets tried as adults are made by prosecutors and lack judicial oversight, guiding standards, and any kind of appellate scrutiny. As a result, there is an uneven and unfair playing field and, worse, many kids who would be much better served in the juvenile system are being treated as adults."

Liane Rozzell, the parent of a youth who was confined in the juvenile system, and the founder and director of Families & Allies for Virginia's Youth, a grassroots advocacy organization said, "I have seen the impact an adult record has on the youth and families I work with. These kids have trouble finding jobs, finishing their education, and can lose the right to vote – all for something they may have done at age 14!"

Block went on to add, "It is not that we think kids shouldn't be accountable for their actions, it is just that we do not want to indiscriminately throw away the keys to our young people's futures. As it stands now too many young people who are not the worst of the worst are being tried and treated as adults. Restoring the role of judges in the transfer decision will ensure kids are tried as adults only when absolutely necessary."

Dr. Jeffrey Aaron, a psychologist at the University of Virginia and at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents said, "Research on adolescent development clearly demonstrates that most adolescent antisocial behavior does not persist into adulthood. Adolescents are in transition and as a group are very responsive to intervention. There is a general consensus among mental health professionals and academic researchers that in most cases trying youth as adults is likely to increase

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rather than decrease their risk of recidivism. Keeping kids in the juvenile system, where they receive education and rehabilitation, rather than placing them with adult offenders who may victimize them or perpetuate their delinquent behavior, will generally lead to much better outcomes."

**The Virginia State Crime Commission meets Thursday, June 25, 2009 at 10:00 a.m. in the General Assembly Building in Richmond.**

The JustChildren Program works to improve Virginia's public education, juvenile justice, and foster care systems. JustChildren believes that whenever the government assumes responsibility for the care of a child in any of these systems the result should be that the child's chances for success in life are improved. JustChildren advocates use direct representation, education and organizing outreach, and state-level advocacy to achieve positive outcomes for its clients.