

## Juvenile justice reform bill gains House approval

By Jim Beam

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BATON ROUGE — The House on a second try voted 67-35 on Thursday to concur with a conference committee report on a criminal justice reform bill aimed at giving juveniles an opportunity for parole after serving 25 years of their life sentences.

The first vote was 46-44 to concur, but 53 votes are required for approval. The Senate had earlier voted 25-11 to concur with a conference committee report.

The U.S. Supreme Court held that the Eighth Amendment prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment doesn't permit a juvenile to be sentenced to life in prison without a reasonable opportunity for parole. The court ruled the decision had to be applied retroactively.

Senate Bill 16, by Sen. Dan Claitor, R-Baton Rouge, also adds provisions for parole eligibility for juvenile offenders convicted of first- and second degree murder whose indictments are on or after Aug. 1 this year.

The legislation was the 10th and final measure in a criminal justice reform package designed to reduce the state's incarceration rate, the highest in the country.

District attorneys would still be able to determine whether a juvenile's life sentence for first- and second-degree murder is to be imposed with or without parole.

The legislation faced more opposition than the other nine bills in the criminal justice reform package. The other nine were already awaiting Gov. John Bel Edwards' signature. The governor promoted the criminal justice package and praised the Legislature for its support.

Rep. Sherman Mack, R-Albany, said he is opposed to the legislation because the time served was reduced from 30 to 25 years. He said victims of these crimes had strongly voiced their opposition to the 25-year provision.

Claitor said prior to gaining Senate approval of his bill that district attorneys would still have the right to declare particular juveniles the "worst of the worst." He said roughly 300 people

statewide who committed crimes as juveniles were sentenced to life.

Aaron Clark-Rizzo, executive director of the Louisiana Center for Children's Rights, said in a statement that the legislation would continue to keep the state from complying with the Supreme Court mandate that "almost no child be sentenced to die in prison."

Sens. Ronnie Johns, R-Sulphur; Eric LaFleur, D-Ville Platte, and Dan "Blade" Morrish, R-Jennings, voted to concur with the committee report. Sen. John Smith, R-Leeville, was opposed.

Reps. Mark Abraham, R-Lake Charles; James Armes, D-Leesville; Mike Danahay, D-Sulphur; Stephen Dwight, R-Moss Bluff; A.B. Franklin, D-Lake Charles; Johnny Guinn, R-Jennings; Dorothy Sue Hill, D-Dry Creek; and Frank Howard, R-Many, voted to concur.

Rep. Bob Hensgens, R-Abbeville, was reported as absent.