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## MASS. CAMPAIGN

# Bills seek to lift criminal justice age

By **Mina Corpuz**

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BOSTON — Jeff Alvarez remembers how he often got into trouble as a teenager in Lawrence. He spent three months on the streets and later two years in an Essex County lockup. Alvarez, now 23, is a member of Lowell-based nonprofit UTEC that helps 13 young adults

through education and employment. He has joined the effort to raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction from 18 to 21 to help others get the support they need.

“If you go to a juvenile jail you’ll get the support that you need like education (and) help with life in general,” he said. “When you’re in an adult jail, they just send

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you there and you just wait until you’re done doing your time.”

Bills offered by Sen. Karen Spilka, D-Ashland, and others aim to raise the juvenile criminal justice age to 21, making Massachusetts the first in the country to do so.

“Young people have unique developmental needs, and our juvenile justice system plays a critical role in helping them get back on track,” Spilka, chair of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, said in a statement. “Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction will increase public safety and provide young people with the age-appropriate rehabilitation and support services they need to lead successful adult lives and positively contribute to their communities.”

Spilka previously sponsored legislation signed into law by former Gov. Deval Patrick in 2013 that made 17-year-olds part of the juvenile court system.

Rep. Stephan Hay, D-Fitchburg, said he sup-

ports raising the juvenile court age because it would help young adults from all backgrounds.

“Treating an 18-year-old the same as you’re treating a 28- or 38-year-old is inappropriate,” he said.

“Although we can say at 18 you’re old enough to do certain things, I don’t think that jail time and criminal records are necessarily the appropriate measures to take for that idea.”

In his district, Hay said, police and local activist groups have worked together for community outreach to help keep young people out of jail.

“It’s encouraging that people aren’t just talking about it or complaining about it,” he said. “They’re saying let’s actually step forward and put together an action plan and let’s work together to try and make this better from both sides.”

Middlesex County Sheriff Peter Koutoujian said his office supports efforts to work with young offenders.

“Evidence clearly shows we have to reevaluate how the justice system deals

with young adults,” Koutoujian said in a statement. “We believe this will help these individuals return to the community more prepared to be engaged, productive citizens.”

The Middlesex Sheriff’s Office works with UTEC through its Streetworker Program and is preparing to open a Young Adult Unit.

Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan was not available for an interview. However, her spokesman, Meghan Kelly, said in an email: “It is important that juveniles are treated appropriately in the criminal justice system. The rights of juveniles must be balanced with the rights of victims and the protection of the general public. Several bills relating to the treatment of juveniles are presently pending in the legislature. The MDAA is in the process of carefully reviewing these bills to make sure that they are consistent with these goals.”

The Worcester County

Sheriff’s Office currently doesn’t work with anyone under the age of 18, said Superintendent David Tuttle.

Some young adults could be diverted from the sheriff’s office if the legislation were to pass, Tuttle said, but it is too early to know how many people this would affect.

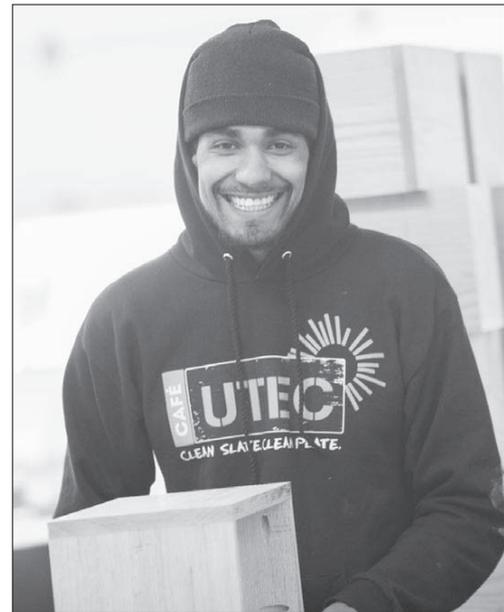
Police departments in Lowell declined comment as did the Worcester and Middlesex district attorney’s offices. Fitchburg Police Chief Ernest Martineau was not available for comment.

Several organizations, including UTEC and Citizens for Juvenile Justice, support the legislation.

UTEC Executive Director Gregg Croteau, said the proposals can help reduce recidivism rates for young adults. About 11 percent of young adults in UTEC are re-arrested within a year, Croteau said, compared to 52 percent statewide.

“It’s one of the better paths for allowing young people a true clean slate,” he said.

Naoka Carey, executive



Jeff Alvarez in the woodworking shop at UTEC, a Lowell-based nonprofit that helps young adults through education and employment. He has joined the effort to raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction from 18 to 21 to help others get the support they need.

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director of Citizens for Juvenile Justice, said she hoped that the effort will gain bipartisan support and affirm the state’s role as a leader for juvenile justice reform.

“Massachusetts has a history, especially in juve-

nile justice, of being a national leader,” she said. “We have a lot to teach other places about how to do this well and how to do it a way that protects public safety, but you’re getting much better outcomes for kids.”