

Editorial: Second chance for young lifers

Staff Reports

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We support legislation that allows for the review of cases involving juveniles sentenced to life without parole after 10 years, potentially allowing some of them to receive a new sentence of 25 years to life. It is both a rational and humane approach to juvenile sentencing.

Senate Bill 399 recognizes, as does The Star, that minors are different from adults in that there is a far greater chance of rehabilitating juveniles. A fact not only recognized by child experts, doctors and science, but also by this country's juvenile-justice system with its sentencing guidelines and rules that differ significantly from the adult system.

SB 399, The Fair Sentencing for Youth Act, authored by state Sen. Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, works this way: Specific criteria established under the law would be used by the courts to determine if a juvenile offender who has served 10 years of a sentence of life without parole qualifies for resentencing. Any new sentence only makes the inmate eligible for parole after he or she has served 25 years behind bars. It's a far cry from giving juveniles who commit serious crimes a get-out-of-jail-free card. Serving 25 years in a harsh prison environment is severe punishment in anybody's book. There are more than 270 inmates in California prisons serving life-without-parole sentences for crimes they committed at ages as young as 14.

We believe SB 399 will offer hope to some of these juveniles facing what amounts to a death sentence by giving them a reason to reform and to become a productive member of a community.

There is also a monetary benefit to SB 399. According to Sen. Yee, keeping the current population of youth offenders already sentenced to life without parole until their deaths in prison will cost the state approximately \$500 million. Each new youth offender given this sentence will cost the state upward of \$2.5 million.

The genesis behind Sen. Yee's bill is the case of a Riverside girl who was 16 when she killed the man who sexually abused her and lured her into prostitution. She was sentenced to life without parole, despite a psychiatric evaluation determining that rehabilitation was possible. She is now 31 years old.

SB 399 passed out of the Assembly Appropriations Committee earlier this week and the full Assembly is expected to debate it today. We urge lawmakers to approve this bill and send it to the governor.