

Youth Access to Counsel (SHB 1140) – Letter to the Editor Toolkit

Write a letter to the editor to protect young people's right to legal representation!

Lawmakers need to hear from you to encourage them to pass legislation that provides young people across Washington with access to a lawyer before they waive their constitutional right to remain silent. Take action by writing a letter to the editor (LTE) and submitting it for publication in your local paper. Make yours more likely to be published by:

- Referencing a recent (within the past week) news article or Op-Ed (guest column), editorial, or other letter to the editor, in your own letter. Sometimes they will publish a letter without a news reference as long as it's timely and relevant to public issues in the news.
- Limiting your letter to around 100 words. Include your name, address, and phone number if submitting via email.
- Being sure to submit to your LOCAL outlet. There are more than 90 blogs and news sites that publish LTEs in WA - here's a list of [WA LTE submission links](#).
- Explain your connection to the issue/why you care/share a fact or personal story/experience/what you know to be true (As a parent, a teacher, a counselor, a lawyer, what I know is...)
- Spell out what you want readers to do: Pass SHB 1140 to protect young people's constitutional rights.

It is important to include messages about why access to a lawyer matters and why young people need legal representation before they are asked to waive their right to remain silent. It's urgent that we pass SHB 1140 to protect the rights of young people because:

- Currently outside of King County, police officers are not required to affirmatively provide legal representation to young people before asking them to make decisions that impact their rights, like their right to remain silent.
- Encounters with law enforcement agents and the criminal legal system can be stressful and confusing for anyone, particularly for young people. Youth often do not understand the consequences of waiving their legal rights and protections and need a lawyer to help them make informed decisions.
- Power dynamics between children and adults, in addition to those between civilians and authority figures like law enforcement agents, could make it difficult for young people to give meaningful consent. Children facing these pressures are more likely to feel compelled to respond. Research has shown that less than 10 percent of youth suspected of committing a crime assert their Miranda rights when stopped by the police.
- While all youth face worse legal and life-long outcomes without access to representation, the risks of not providing a lawyer fall disproportionately on Black youth. Due to the historic over policing of Black neighborhoods, Black youth in Washington are 5.26 times more likely to be arrested than white youth despite not participating in more delinquent behavior. Without representation, the inherent racial inequity in policing also leads to inequity in outcomes for Black youth.
- Providing youth with access to counsel when it counts improves public safety. Respecting a youth's rights helps them and their community build trust in the system. Individuals who trust the system are more likely to comply with it.
- Youth with representation before they make critical legal decisions improves outcomes, provides them with needed resources and protects them from the life-long consequences of a criminal conviction.

Examples of Youth Access to Counsel LTEs. Please personalize and add your own stories.

As a parent, I support legislation to give youth access to a lawyer before police ask them to waive their rights. Youth need adults to look after their best interests. When a young person is stopped by an authority figure like a police officer, they need guidance on how to protect their legal rights. That's the kind of support that only a lawyer can provide. The Legislature should support the success of Washington's youth by protecting them from the life-long consequences of bad legal decisions. They should support SHB 1140 to give young people the support they need to succeed.

As someone who works in the criminal legal system, I have watched youth suffer negative consequences because they did not have legal advice before waiving their right to remain silent. These rights, which are Constitutionally protected, are available to everyone, but young people who do not know, or are too afraid, to use them, can be saddled with life-long consequences because they do not have a lawyer. Washington should give its young people the legal advice they need before it's too late. The Legislature should pass SHB 1140 to connect youth with lawyers.

As a teacher, I see young people make mistakes all the time. It's part of learning. But when police get involved in youths' mistakes, the consequences can be lifelong. Youth need the guidance of adults like teachers in the classroom, and lawyers in the legal system. Without good guidance, outcomes for youth are poor. Given the over policing of Black neighborhoods, Black youth are disproportionately at risk. In both education and the legal system, Washington should provide youth the tools they need to succeed. Passing SHB 1140 to give youth access to lawyers is a great start.