

Introduction

Kirsten Barber: Hi, and welcome to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. There are great people, programs and resources within the department. In each episode of the Safety Scoop, we'll share how NCDPS employees prevent, protect and prepare North Carolinians and help enhance safety in our state. We hope you'll listen along and learn something you may not have known about the largest state agency in North Carolina.

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Julia Jarema: Hi, I'm Julia.

Kirsten: And I'm Kirsten!

Julia: And you're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

Kirsten: NCDPS is the largest department in the North Carolina state government with some amazing programs and resources...

Julia: ...as well as phenomenal personnel and volunteers.

Kirsten: Listen along as we take you behind the scenes and dive into how the people, programs and resources within this department enhance the safety of the people of North Carolina—give you the scoop, if you will, of all things NCDPS.

Julia: NCDPS's mission is to safeguard the people of North Carolina through prevention, protection and preparation. As you listen to this podcast, we hope you'll learn something you may not have known about the ways the people of NCDPS are working to keep our state safe.

[Music]

Season 1 Episode 1

Kirsten: Welcome to the Safety Scoop! For decades, some teenagers in North Carolina who have committed crimes have been tried as adults. In 2017, state lawmakers increased the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 16 to 18. The Juvenile Justice Reinvestment Act, or so-called Raise the Age legislation, ensures that starting on December 1st, most nonviolent criminal charges of children and teenagers under the age of 18 will no longer be heard in the adult criminal system.

Julia: Here to talk with us about Raise the Age is Billy Lassiter, Deputy Secretary of Juvenile Justice for the Department of Public Safety. Billy has worked within the state's juvenile justice system for more than 20 years and over the years has emerged as a nationally respected leader in the field. Co-authoring of "Preventing Violence and Crime in America's Schools: From Put Down to Lockdown," he has been featured on a number of major news networks and national publications to share his expertise in the fields of youth violence and school safety. Governor Cooper recently appointed Billy to chair the Governor's Task Force for Safer Schools. Welcome, Billy.

Dep. Sec. Billy Lassiter: Thank you!

Julia: I understand that North Carolina is the last state to increase the age of juvenile jurisdiction. Juvenile advocates have been working for this change for decades. What changed in 2017 to convince lawmakers to raise the age?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: So, the original juvenile act that created the juvenile justice system in the state of North Carolina was first looked at in 1909, and then in 1919 it actually, finally passed, and since that time period, we've been studying the issue of what should be the proper age of juvenile jurisdiction. So, it was originally passed it as being 16 because at the time, they wanted 16-year-olds to be able to go to World War I and fight, and so if they were considered to be juveniles at that time, they wouldn't have been allowed to do that. So, in 1935, right in the middle of the Great Depression, the governor and the chief justice of the state did a study to look at whether we should raise the age then. That task force and study made a recommendation to raise the age in 1935, but at the time, we're in the middle of the Great Depression, and there weren't enough resources to do it. And so, as soon as the resources became available, they said, "We should do this," and so only about 100 years later we got around to raising the age in the state of North Carolina.

Number two was that we did this as a bipartisan effort. We really looked at both Republican and Democrats' views on why we should raise the age in the state of North Carolina. We went and talked to law enforcement. We went and talked to victims. We went and talked to prosecutors and judges. We made sure that all of their interests were put into the legislation to really put together a policy that made sense for the state of North Carolina. And that's the real difference this time, I think, is that we listened to what the public was saying and what their concerns were about Raise the Age. And I think what we've put together is a policy that really reflects that compromise between, um, what advocates wanted and what law enforcement and what victims in—in these cases wanted for juveniles. And so, this was done because it's the best practice and, uh, and—and we believe it's going to reduce crime in the state of North Carolina.

Kirsten: Can you take us through some of the details of the Raise the Age legislation, like what types of criminal charges will now be heard in the juvenile justice system, and what types of charges will remain in Superior Court?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: So, uh, the legislation, one of the concerns that a lot of folks had, especially on the law enforcement and the victim side, were that very serious and violent offenses were going to be put into the juvenile justice system, and they were concerned that that would be, um, those kids w-would be getting off for very serious crimes. And so, one of the exceptions that was put into the legislation were that A through G felonies—so these are the most violent and serious offenses that anybody can commit in our criminal justice system—those A through G felonies are automatic, mandatory transfer to adult court. It's only the H and I felonies and the misdemeanors that remain in juvenile court.

And so, that may sound like, uh, well, maybe most of the crimes are going to be going to adult court. Well, actually, that's not the case. Um, most crimes that are committed by 16- or 17-year-olds in the state of North Carolina, 70% of them are misdemeanors. When you add the H and I felonies into that—that group, um, that adds about another 10%, so only about 20% of the remaining offenses would be automatically, mandatorily transferred to the adult system while most of the offenses will remain in juvenile court.

And so, there's also a couple of other exceptions. One is for motor vehicle violations, um, so if you get a speeding ticket, for example, that will be handled the same way for a 16- or 17-year-old as it is today, as it will after December 1st. And so, it's really, um, that was put in place because there's so many traffic offenses that are committed by 16- or 17-year-olds. Last year, over *20,000* tickets were given to 16- and 17-year-olds. We didn't want to overwhelm the juvenile court system with speeding tickets and minor traffic infractions, so those infractions will remain in the adult system also. So, those are the two big exceptions: um, motor vehicle violations and, um, A through G felonies will remain in the adult system. Everything else will be in the juvenile justice system, and those juveniles will have the ad-additional resources that are available in that system to make sure that they don't get in trouble again.

Julia: Makes a lot of sense. So, why is the Raise the Age a big deal for juveniles and for our justice system?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: It's a big deal for juveniles, especially to start with, because it helps them make sure that they have hope. Um, we often say that sometimes you make a stupid mistake when you're 16 or 17 years old, and that stupid mistake sticks with you for the rest of your life. A good example that I always like to give is that, um, recently at the Highway Patrol graduation we had Highway Patrol Cadets that were just finished Basic Training, and there was an empty seat up on the stage. And I asked what happened to the cadet that's not there today. And it turns out that this, uh, 25-year-old cadet, when he was 16 years old, gave his teacher the middle finger. He got charged with disorderly conduct at school. As being charged with, uh, disorderly conduct at school, when it—when it actually went to court, they dismissed it. They said, “This is not something that the court should be dealing with.” But he got charged, and so when he file—filled out his application 10 years later, uh, to, uh, apply to be a Highway Patrolman, he

checked the box that he had never been involved in the criminal justice system before because he thought since the charge was dismissed, no big deal. I don't need to put it on my application. Of course, when they did the criminal background check, they found that he had had this one charge when he was 16 years old. And now, since he lied on his application, he wasn't able to be immediately employed by the department. It took over a year to clear him through all the hurdles that had to take place to make sure that he was responsible enough to be employed by our department.

This was a young man that, um, had gone and served in our military and served three tours in Afghanistan, obviously never got in trouble again for those 10 years and because of that one stupid mistake when he was 16, we couldn't employ him to be a Highway Patrol Officer. That doesn't make sense, um, and that's really what this legislation is about is how do we make sure that 16- or 17-year-olds that do make a mistake (because often they do), we don't hold that one mistake against them for the rest of their life. So, employability is a big part of that, but also, most people don't realize that to get financial aid, to go to college, to get housing, all of those applications ask, "Have you ever been charged as a criminal in—in your past?" And one charge can hold you back from getting financial aid or getting into that college or even get housing on campus, um, when you go to college. So, for a lot of these kids that make that one mistake, we're destroying all their opportunities to get education and to get jobs moving forward.

Um, so, there's a huge economic benefit to allowing them to have the opportunity to get those jobs. We are automatically discriminating against our kids because every other state had already changed their laws. So, if you were, uh, competing for a place to go to UNC Chapel Hill or to go to NC State, and you're competing against someone from Virginia, and you both got into that same stupid little fight at school, and you both got charged, the kid in Virginia, that—that record would have been confidential. In North Carolina, they'd have to check the box, and so we're discriminating against our own kids in getting into *our* colleges because we were making them, um, report that criminal record moving forward.

Why is it important for the state? Because it reduces recidivism. What is recidivism? That's the chances of that kid coming back into the system in the future. All the studies that have been done of Raise the Age show that there's about a 12.5% reduction by putting kids in the juvenile justice system versus serving them in the adult system. In the states that have recently implemented Raise the Age, for example in Texas, they saw a 21% drop in recidivism in the first two years of implementing Raise the Age. In New York (that was the last state to just recently implement Raise the Age), they saw a 27% *drop* in juvenile crime in the *first year*. And so, we really believe that this will create safer environments in our communities across the state of North Carolina by reducing that recidivism, reducing the chances that you'll get victimized because those kids are getting the services that they actually need to make sure that they don't get in trouble again.

Kirsten: So, can you tell us what the treatment differences are for children between the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: So, in the—in the state of North Carolina, we have what's called a comprehensive strategy for working with juveniles, and that comprehensive strategy really starts from early prevention strategies all the way through our Deep End Services where a kid would be committed to a Youth Development Center, um, and then we use post-release services for those kids when they come out. The big difference between the juvenile justice system and the adult system is that those services are tailor-fitted to what that kid needs. Um, so, if a kid comes in, and they have a substance abuse problem, we're going to give them a substance abuse program that addresses that particular issue that drove them into the system to begin with. We use a risk and needs assessment that helps determine what are those services that those kids need? And through our Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils, which we fund for the state in every county across the state of North Carolina, we provide diversion techniques and programs in each of those counties to make sure that they're services that are available for those kids that need those.

And so, um, we do a lot of work on the front end and with things like diversion. So, when a kid gets a original petition filed on them, about 30% of those petitions, we divert. And what is that? We—we do a plan or contract with that kid. We say, "Hey, you—you knocked down your neighbor's mailbox. You got charged with, uh, vandalizing their mailbox. If you fix the mailbox, if you go and write a apology letter to the neighbor for knocking down the mailbox and you come back to us in six months, and your parents say that you've been doing well in school and that you have, uh, met your curfew and those types of things, then we'll—we'll make all this go away." That gives that child a chance to show restitution back to the community and be accountable for his behavior, but not tie up the court system with small things that really don't cause us to be really scared about what's happening with that juvenile.

In our Deep End Services, we make sure that every child that is—is in one of our Youth Development Centers, they have to go to school. It's a requirement. So, unlike in jail or in prison where it's a choice or, a lot of times, a lot of the inmates in an adult facility *want* to go to school, but it's not an option 'cause those services aren't available. And so, um, those—those services are—are available, along with in every one of our facilities, we have psychologists and social workers with—that work with those kids on a 1:15 ratio. Uh, and so, very intensive services that we do with those young people. In addition to that, what we see is that a lot of the kids that are involved in our system do have mental health problems, so we engage the mental health, um, system in—in the solutions also.

And probably one of the other big differences between the juvenile justice system and the adult system, is we involve the family. Um, family involvement is a huge part of what we do in the juvenile justice system. Parents *have* to come

to court with the kids. They have to come to the initial intake, um, conference with their kids, and a lot of times what we see is that the parents need some skills themselves. They need some resources themselves to make sure that they understand how to work with their child moving forward. And so, we offer parenting classes. We offer resources to those parents. We help the parents. If they're having trouble finding a job themselves, we actually hook them up with employment opportunities to make sure that they can be a supportive structure for that child moving forward. We do things like functional family therapy where we go into the household and not only work with, um, the child that's on probation, but the parents and any siblings that are in the house to make sure that they have the services that they need. It's really looking at the root cause of what drove the kid to come to the system in the beginning and making sure that we have, um, matched up services that—that directly affect that—that problem that drove them to the system.

Kirsten: So, it sounds like this is a multi-level approach, and there are a *lot* of moving parts that are involved.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Absolutely, so, um, one of the things when the law passed in 2017 is that we asked the General Assembly, "Give us two and a half years to prepare, 'cause this is not a simple thing that you can do overnight." Um, we need to hire staff, we needed to build facilities, we need to renovate facilities, we need to make sure that we have the staffing at those facilities but we also need to work with our partners. This is not just a Department of Public Safety issue. This is a, um, judicial branch issue. This is a issue we're working with local law enforcement partners, local DAs and ADAs, um, district attorneys to make sure they're ready for the change. Judges, uh, defense attorneys, but also the program providers in those local communities.

We've spent the last two-and-a-half years training all of those folks. We've trained over 5,000 people in the last two months, um, law enforcement especially, on this change, and so I think it was really important that we needed that time up front to implement and make sure that we're going to do this correctly. And that's why the, uh, General Assembly also created the Juvenile Jurisdiction Advisory Committee that's made up of stakeholders from across the state to help us make sure we're covering all those bases moving forward. And so, it is definitely a multi-level approach that we've taken on, but this is also a collaborative approach. These are *our* kids, and our communities need to make sure we're surrounding those kids with all the supportive structures they need to be successful.

Julia: Absolutely, and you just mentioned a lot of the agencies that have been involved in making these changes and preparing for the Raise the Age legislation. Can you talk a little bit about what agencies will see impacts from the change in juvenile jurisdiction, and how would you describe these impacts?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: So, obviously the department is—is the biggest player that's impacted through our services because this will include about a 64% increase in the population

coming into the juvenile justice system. So, we are hiring, um, juvenile court counselors to work with that population that will be entering the system, but we're also working with the Department of Social Services because a lot of these kids have parents that need additional support. Um, we're working with the mental health system because one of the big differences between the juvenile justice system and the adult system is every kid that comes into the juvenile justice system gets a mental health screening. If that mental health screening shows that they need a further assessment, we send *all* those kids to get that further assessment. That's a big difference between the adult system where that adult would have gone to jail, and they wouldn't have gotten that assessment. And so, a lot of times we are seeing a lot of 16- or 17-year-olds but even 18- or 19-year-olds that are in our jails that have mental health problems that have been undiagnosed and unserved, and so we've been working with the mental health agencies across the state to get ready. This will be an increase to their population because if you screen for it and you look for it, you're going to probably find it. And so, we know that there's going to be an increased population for them, also.

We're working with schools. So, a big part of this is also what we call the school-justice partnership, and so we're working with schools to really think through what are those issues that should be going to the criminal justice system, and what are those things that should be handled as a school discipline issue? For example, the story I told you earlier with the Highway Patrolman. Really, should we be putting in—a person into the criminal justice system for simply giving someone the finger? Is that wrong behavior? Absolutely. Should there be accountability for it? Absolutely. But is the criminal justice system the system that should be handling that, or is there a better way to solve that through school discipline and through parent discipline? And so, we're working with schools right now to draw those lines and set up partnerships across the state, um, to have those conversations. So, it's really every agency that works with young people in our state is going to be affected. Mental health, DSS, schools all are part of this equation, and we've been working with all those players, and they're all members of our Juvenile Jurisdiction Advisory Committee.

Kirsten:

So, you've taken us through a lot of the legislation and the long-term benefits that are associated with Raise the Age. Can you tell us a little bit about how much it will cost to implement Raise the Age?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter:

So, there is a cost, obviously, to Raise the Age because, um, the juvenile justice system is more intensive, it—it focuses more on direct services with kids and because of that, it—it costs more money. So, for example, a—a normal probation officer in the state of North Carolina that works in—in the adult system typically has a caseload of 50, 60 probationers on their caseload. In juvenile court, that's normally around 24, so we cut it in half. And then the services that we provide in the juvenile justice system are more intensive and they work more directly in the home and with the family as a whole, so those—because those services are more intensive, they do cost more. And so, there is a upfront cost to implementing Raise the Age.

In the first year, we're looking at about a \$24 million investment from the General Assembly, and in the second year it's close to a \$47 million investment, um, from the General Assembly into Raise the Age, and that covers everything from, um, diversion programming, community-based programming, to juvenile court counselors to facility enhancements and operations, but also looking at court officials, that includes, um, ADAs and judges, that will be added because of Raise the Age. We believe that this is a good, foundational step that the General Assembly has passed as far as resources, but more may be, um, once we start to actually implement. We think we know how many kids are coming into the system, but we won't really know until they actually start walking in the door. We have gotten commitments from the General Assembly and from the governor's office to make sure that additional resources can be available if we need those. I do want to emphasize, although that sounds like a lot of money, and it is a lot of money, there is a huge, um, savings on the back end.

Julia: On the back end.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Yeah.

Julia: Absolutely.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Because when you reduce that recidivism, you're reducing the number of—of juveniles that eventually will have to go to adult prisons, that will have to be on adult probation, that will need services in the future through Medicaid and, uh, other services. So, when we—we look at the economic advantage of doing this, by having kids employed instead of in prison, it makes a huge difference to, number one, they pay taxes, and they're not dragging on the system over here in the prison system. And so, all the cost-benefit analysis that have been done on this project, and I will mention there have been four of them—if there's a policy that's been more studied in the state, I'd like to see what it was.

[Laughs]

But all four of those cost-benefit analysis have shown that there will be a annual savings to the state that ranges between, uh, about \$10 million all the way up to \$57 million on an ongoing basis, and that's *after* you take into account the additional costs that the justice system costs moving forward.

Julia: So, what has DPS been doing to prepare for this change, and are we—are we ready to implement this initiative?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: So, there's—there's a provision in the law that's called "Once an Adult, Always an Adult," and I think it's important to highlight this because if—if you commit a crime on November 30th of 2019, you remain in the adult system, even if you're 16 or 17 years old. It's only offenses that occur after December 1st of 2019. We asked for that provision. This is one of those lessons learned that we learned from other states. So, for example, in New York, they didn't have that provision,

so on the very first day of implementation they moved every 16- or 17-year-old out of a jail directly into a Juvenile Detention Facility, moved all of the 16- or 17-year-olds who were on adult probation to juvenile probation on that very first day. We saw that. We saw that was a lesson learned. You can't handle that. Over—it overwhelmed their system. It would have overwhelmed our system also, so we did this “Once an Adult, Always an Adult” to say that only new offenses that come into the system will enter the juvenile justice system. So, yes, there will be an increase in the caseloads and what we're expecting in—in our facilities as far as the numbers of beds that we'll need, but it will be a slow increase. Only as those new crimes occur will they be added to the juvenile justice system. So, this was a really important thing that we put in place to make sure that we—we would be ready.

Um, in the time that we've had, um, since the 2017 when this law passed, the General Assembly has given us money to build a new facility, and that facility is not done yet, so in the meantime, we renovated several older facilities to make sure they could be temporary housing, um, for these juveniles that are coming into the system and so the new facility can be built. We've been hiring juvenile court counselors. The year before, um, the General Assembly gave us 65 additional juvenile court counseling positions. We've already hired those positions. We've already trained those people. They're on the job today. In the last budget, in, um, House Bill 1001, the General Assembly gave us an additional 97 juvenile court counselors. We've started hiring those—those, uh, positions right now.

So, there's been a lot of work that's been put in—in upfront to make sure that we have personnel on the ground Day One to make sure we're ready. And we're—we're slowly hiring additional staff, um, over time because we knew all the complaints wouldn't be coming into the system on the very first day. But the other steps that we've taken are training and making sure our state—our other stakeholders are ready also, and so we've made videos. We've done, uh, flowcharts. We've done cards that Patrol officers can put in their, um, patrol cars that tell them how to handle a juvenile in their—in their community. So, we've done a lot of training guides to make sure that not only our—our staff but our stakeholders are also ready for this major change in the state of North Carolina.

Kirsten: So, you've taken us through some lessons learned from the state of New York and their implementation of Raise the Age. Have you guys looked at any other states and the impacts that this legislation has had when they implemented it?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Yeah, so we actually brought in, um, four other states that had just most recently implemented Raise the Age in their state. So, at the last Juvenile Jurisdiction Advisory committee, we had them come and present and asked them what were their lessons learned. And so, New York was one of those states. Um, we had Illinois, um, Louisiana and, uh, I think it was South Carolina that we brought in, uh, to be part of that conversation. They all had lessons learned, but at the very end of the presentation, one of the questions that we

asked them was, "If you had to write the headline of what does Raise the Age mean for your community, or what did it mean in your state, um, as far as bad effects or things that you were concerned about that happened moving forward, what would your headline would be?" And over-unanimously, every single one of them said, "No big deal. Um, we were able to accomplish this with the resources that we thought we would need, based off of our projections," or "Our projections were too high."

Um, for example, we talked to Connecticut, also. They built two brand-new facilities. One of those facilities they've never opened, and the other facility they only used about half of it for—for the population coming in because they saw their juvenile population drop because the recidivism rate dropped when they, um, r-raised the age in their state. And so, we saw really overwhelmingly from other states this was a good experience, um, that, um, they had in their states, and it actually led to the results that we're expecting in the state of North Carolina which is lower recidivisms, lower levels of juvenile crime in the state. Um, and so, that made us very optimistic about where we need to head in our state and how we should, uh, address those issues.

Julia: Well, that brings up a good point because we've already studied some states, and—and like you said earlier, we are the last ones to be adopting this legislation. Uh, do we have any ideas on how long, uh, it will take or how long do we anticipate it may take to resee—to see results in North Carolina from this legislative change?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: So, we—we think that it's going to take two full years, um, to really see the population fully shift from, um, the adult system to the juvenile justice system because we have "Once an Adult, Always an Adult." We know that that 16—those 16- or 17-year-olds that have already been charged in the last year or have been convicted in the last year, they're staying in the adult system, so it's going to take those full two years to have them all age out of the system, um, and all of those juveniles be served in the juvenile justice system. So, we think after those two years, we'll—we'll really start to see the full return on the policy, um, and I—I imagine, after four years, we'll see the full cost savings start to kick in for the state of North Carolina.

Those are the projections that we've put forward, and that's why the General Assembly continued the Juvenile Jurisdiction Advisory Committee to exist all the way through 2023, um, because there are things that probably we haven't gotten completely right. We've created all kinds of dashboards and analytics that are going along with this policy so that we can measure how effective we're being and if we need additional staff at a location because of the numbers are growing in that area that we weren't anticipating. We have all this information that will be coming into the system that will help us make sure we're making those right decisions. And then the Juvenile Jurisdiction Advisory Committee is tasked with making additional recommendations to the General Assembly about things that need to change in the legislation or additional resources that are

needed. But we do believe after that—that four-year process that we will see the ultimate results that we are—we are expecting.

Kirsten: So, now we're going to turn that question to you. What is that headline that you want to see that describes the most important change or impact for children in North Carolina following Raise the Age?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: I think that—I think the headline is “North Carolina Did the Right Thing for Kids, um, and Young People in our State.” It—it—that is really what we expect this policy is going to do. It’s going to help young people get on the right track, give them hope, give them opportunities for jobs, um, and ultimately, we—we believe that’s the best thing for those young people, and it’s the best thing for our communities because it makes them safer. And so, the ultimate headline, I believe, is that North Carolina does the right thing for—for young people in our state.

Kirsten: I like that word, hope.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Yeah. Yeah, and that's really what we're trying to do, is make sure that they have hope of—of getting employment in the future. Uh, we often tell people when we're looking at post-release for a kid coming out of the facility, the number one factor that drives them to make sure that they don't get back in trouble again, is they get a job. Um, get employment, and they have—they see that there's a way to make money and be successful without getting in trouble with the law. And so, we want to make sure that we're not crushing that dream from the very beginning. If you get a charge at 16 years old, that sticks with you until you're 65, and that makes it very difficult for you to get a job throughout your whole life. And so, we really want to give those young people that hope that they can get that job moving forward.

Julia: So, Billy, what would you say to our critics and to people who are concerned about Raise the Age? They may view this change in legislation as, uh, “soft on crime” or going easier on kids.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Well, I—I say several things. One, we took those concerns into account. So, we—we weighed the A through G’s to adult court, um, so they will be facing the same, um, criteria that any adult would be facing for the A through G’s. For the H and I’s and misdemeanors, what I would say is that the juvenile justice system actually can hold kids and their families more accountable, sometimes, than the adult system, especially if that kid has any past history with the juvenile justice system *or* if they have—have... You know, because most H and I’s in the adult system don't go to prison anyway, um, we can actually do more with them by putting them on electronic monitoring, by putting—holding their families accountable, by making sure that they go to school which is a very important factor that we want to make sure that 16- or 17-year-olds are doing. There's so many more things because we have that smaller caseload in the juvenile justice system, we really get in there and dig into the what’s going on in this family, what’s going on with this child to make sure that they're successful.

The other thing that I would say is that if you look at the brain science about 16- or 17-year-olds, they don't think like you and I do. They don't see risks the same way that we do. Um, the brain science says that—that most young males, especially, their brains aren't fully developed until they're 25 years old. The last part of the brain that fully develops is the part called the frontal cortex. That's the part of the brain that says, "Don't do this. It's stupid." And what we find is that 16- or 17-year-olds, they know the difference between right and wrong. It's not that they don't understand that. The problem is they don't stop to think about it. Um, and so, a lot of times they're making that stupid mistake.

If we have tailored services that are directed towards what caused them to be into the system in the first place, um, we're actually getting better results. I think, whether you've—you call it soft on crime or you call it therapeutic or however you want to address it, if you're getting a better result, isn't that ultimately what we all want? We're reducing recidivism, and that—that's the chances of that kid coming back into the system. Like everybody that says that they want better results from the criminal justice system, that's the one thing that they're really looking for. That's what we're really good at in the juvenile justice system, and I believe that's why this is not a soft on crime approach. This is a *smart* on crime approach. This truly addresses the behaviors that drove them to the system to begin with.

Julia:

Is there anything else you want to add?

Dep. Sec. Lassiter:

I think the—the—the big thing is that I understand, um, not only from our staff but from people in the community, there's a little anxiety right now because any change that's im-plemented in the state of North Carolina creates some anxiety of the unknown. What's coming next? And what I want to encourage people is that we are prepared. We have done the work. We have put in the—the exercises, the training, to make sure we're ready for this change, um, and so I would ensure people that while it's natural and normal to be anxious about a change like this, that this is the right change. You're doing the right thing for young people in the state. And if that makes us a little bit uncomfortable as adults for a little while, that's okay, because in the ultimate ends of doing the right thing for kids, we as the adults should feel a little uncomfortable to make sure we're doing that right thing to give that child that hope that they need to be successful.

And so, I—I encourage you, if you have problems or you see issues with the law, that there's a chance they'll still make those changes. And so, through the Juvenile Jurisdiction Advisory Committee, through, um, if you work for the Department of Public Safety, through your management structure, make those recommendations. We want to hear them. Um, we want to know what else we need to change to make this work correctly. Did we get every single thing right? No, of course not. There are always going to be bumps in the road, but we need to know that. We are listening, and we're ready to be nimble and make those

changes that are needed to make sure this is a successful policy in the state of North Carolina.

So, I just really just want to thank our staff, the citizens of the state of North Carolina, law enforcement, our judges, our DAs for jumping on board with this change and—and un—making that feeling, that uncomfortable feeling they're having right now of that anxiety about a big change coming in our system, but saying, "We're going to make this change, and we're going to do it the right way, and we're on board, and we want to do the right things for kids moving forward." I really want to thank people for doing that. Um, I know especially my staff have worked extremely hard over the last two years, and I could not be more thankful for what they have done, going above and beyond the call of duty to do things that aren't in their normal job description to make sure that we're ready for this change, and I'm just eh-eternally grateful for what they have done to make sure that we're ready.

Julia: Thank you, Billy, for taking the time to explain this important initiative and for your leadership and for the advocacy for the children of North Carolina and for giving our kids hope.

Dep. Sec. Lassiter: Thank you.

Conclusion

Kirsten: If you've listened to this podcast and you're interested in learning more about Raise the Age, you can check out more information on ncdps.gov. Just type in Raise the Age in the search bar.

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Julia: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Safety Scoop. To learn more about NCDPS, go to ncdps.gov. Tune in next time on your favorite podcast app to hear more behind-the-scenes stories from the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

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