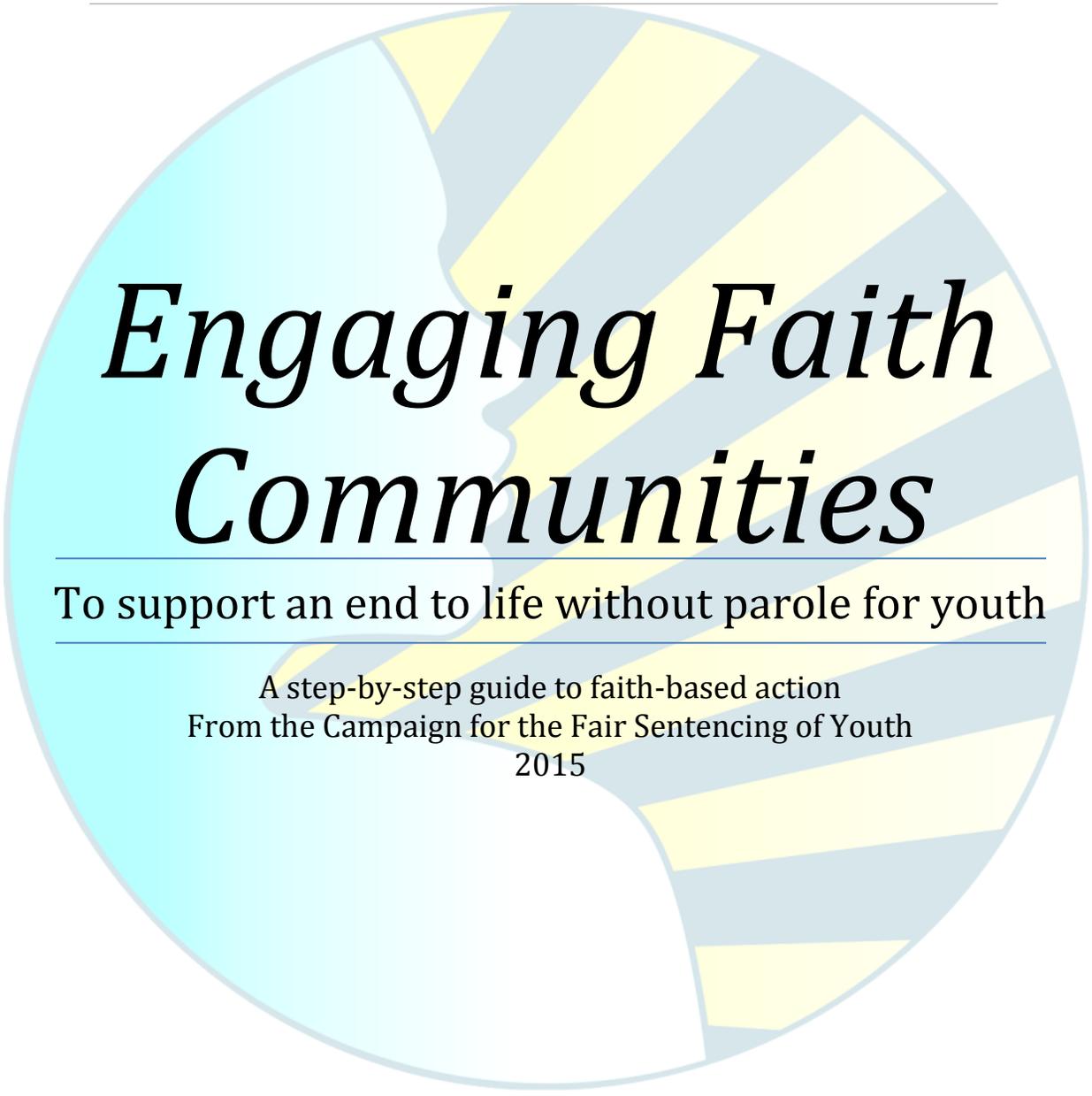


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# *Engaging Faith Communities*

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To support an end to life without parole for youth

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A step-by-step guide to faith-based action  
From the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth  
2015

Dear Advocate,

**You** are important to the movement to end the practice of sentencing children to life in prison without the possibility of parole. It is just that simple.

More than 2,500 children in the United States have been sentenced to life without the possibility of parole—a sentence to die in prison. This is a moral issue that cannot be ignored. All children, even those convicted of serious crimes, possess the capacity for redemption. Given this, they should not be defined solely by their worst moments. The United States is alone in imposing this sentence upon children, casting an irrevocable judgment that these youth are beyond redemption.

But change is taking place, and there is hope for even greater transformations in the future with your help.

Our country is in a new era regarding the way that it holds children accountable for the harm that they have caused. This has led to a rolling back of some of the harshest and most extreme sentences. In 2005, the United States Supreme Court eliminated the death penalty for children, ruling it a cruel and unusual punishment. Just five years later in 2010, the Court ruled life without parole unconstitutional for all non-homicide offenses committed by youth. In 2011, the Court went further, ruling that youth status matters beyond the context of harsh sentencing policies, and that law enforcement officials must consider the age of a suspect in determining whether Miranda warnings should be issued. Now, just in June 2012 in the landmark *Miller v. Alabama* decision, the Court ruled mandatory life sentences without parole unconstitutional for all crimes committed by youth, including homicide.

This is where *you* come in. These decisions need implementation throughout the country and we expect resistance to sound and just policies. We also believe that we must, in good conscience, continue to advocate for an end to life without parole for all youth, whether the sentence was applied by a judge with discretion or as a legislative mandate. Now more than ever *it is important for us to take action and spread awareness* about the injustice of sentencing a child to die in prison. **By educating others about life without parole for youth, we strengthen the movement that seeks to end this practice.**

Engaging faith communities is an *integral* part of this process. People of faith are passionate and energetic advocates. Encouraging them to become active in our movement to end life without parole for youth can be as simple as using this *step-by-step toolkit*.

We hope you will join us in our movement to seek fair sentencing for all youth that reflects our human rights, values, and moral beliefs. We believe that society should not be in the practice of discarding young people convicted of crimes for life, but instead, should provide the potential for them to one day return to our communities as productive members of society. Together we can make this a reality.

In solidarity,  
The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth

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This page provides a **brief overview** of the issue of sentencing youth to life without parole. It can also be used as a **resource** for faith leaders when they are speaking **with their communities**.

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Get started on the next page, *Finding People of Faith*, which has **information on how to effectively identify potential faith leaders**—whether they are in your own faith community or one that you are seeking to engage for the first time.

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#### Sample Introduction Letters

After you have located faith communities, these *Sample Introduction Letters*, can be used to **introduce yourself and your intentions to a prospective leader**. Feel free to use it as a form letter to write to a faith leader or as talking points for a phone call.

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#### Prayers

This page contains website links that can be used as resources to provide **sample prayers** to faith leaders.

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This page contains **some excerpts** from different holy books that can be helpful in framing your outreach with faith leaders.

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The *Sample Bulletin* is an **additional tool for faith leaders**. You can ask them to post it in their weekly newsletter or on a bulletin board at their place of worship.

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#### Activities

Once you have informed a faith community and their faith leader, check the *Activities* page for a **variety of different actions** that you can propose as ways for faith leaders and their communities to show support for those serving in prison.

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Now that you have the attention of both a faith leader and their community, there is always the inevitable question: “**so what can we do?**” Refer to the *Getting Involved* page to find directions in which you can point them.

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#### Responsive Faith Communities

Finally, the last page, *Responsive Faith Communities*, provides a way for you to **keep track of faith communities** that advocate on behalf of youth serving life without parole sentences. You should keep track of these communities for future engagement.

## Fast Facts

### *About life without parole for youth:*

- As people of faith, we are called to recognize and work on behalf of the most vulnerable in our society—especially our children.
- There are 2,500 youth serving life without the possibility of parole in the United States. There are none in the rest of the world.
- Life without parole is a sentence to die in prison. There is no hope of ever being released.
- Sentencing youth to life without the possibility of parole sends an unmistakable message that they are beyond redemption.
- Our nation’s highest court has held three times since 2010 that child status is relevant to matters of justice and the law. The message that “kids are different” has been established by the Court.
- The United States and South Sudan are the only two countries in the world that have not ratified the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which prohibits sentencing youth to life without parole.
- Evidence from behavioral and child development research concludes that young people who commit crimes are more likely to reform their behavior and have a better chance at rehabilitation than adults.
- Incarcerating a youth for life costs taxpayers an estimated \$2 million per prisoner.
- On average across the country, black youth are serving life without parole at a per capita rate that is 10 times that of white youth.
- An estimated 59 percent of people serving life without parole sentences for crimes committed as youth received the sentence for their first-ever offense

# Finding People of Faith

*Here is how to get started finding faith Communities*

## **Your Faith Community**

- *Talk with your own faith leader* – **Schedule a meeting** with your faith leader to discuss activities your faith community could do.
- *Post a bulletin in your faith community* – If you are not able to talk with your faith leader, **post the bulletin** attached below in your place of worship to inform your faith community about juvenile justice. **Include your contact information and try to gather a group for discussion.**

## **Finding a Faith Community**

- *Search online for social justice based faith communities* – a quick search on Google can provide you with a list of faith communities and faith leaders to contact in your area. Keywords to consider in your search:
  - *Prison/ Re-entry Ministry* – faith organizations that work with prison ministry and/or have programs to help the formerly incarcerated re-enter society are often receptive to messaging regarding youth sentencing.
  - *Homeless Shelter* – faith-based organizations that provide services to people experiencing homelessness, recognize the importance of working for people that society has marginalized. These communities may also be willing to talk about life without parole for youth.
  - *Social Activism* – faith communities that are welcoming to progressive movements (such as *LGBT, food justice, HIV/AIDS*) are often open to other movements such as prison and sentencing reform.
  - *Interfaith Groups* - interfaith communities often gather around social justice issues, including youth justice and prison ministry.
- *Search online for youth groups* – look for local youth-based organizations such as faith youth groups or afterschool programs. Young people are valuable energetic allies. Share information with their leaders and ask them to do the same with their youth.
- *Groups focusing on over-incarceration in general* – Following the publication of Michelle Alexander’s book “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,” organizations, groups, and individuals in communities throughout the country have begun to do education and organizing work on this issue. Many of these organizations would likely be interested in learning more about life without parole for youth. For book tour locations and involved organizations, please access the action section of Michelle Alexander’s website at: <http://www.newjimcrow.com/action.html>.

## Sample Introduction Letter #1

*Use this as a form letter/e-mail or as a guide for a phone conversation with a faith leader*

[MY RETURN ADDRESS]

[Date]

Dear [Name of Faith Leader],

My name is [your name]. *[If appropriate mention your association with the faith community, i.e. "My name is Daniel and I have been a member for 11 years"]*. I am writing to you to begin a conversation about the practice of sentencing youth to life without parole—an issue that is particularly important to me.

Our faith tells us that all children—even those convicted of serious crimes— can experience redemption and, thus, should not be defined by their worst moments. As people of faith, we know that we have a moral responsibility to advocate for the most vulnerable in our society, especially our children, and uphold their dignity and human rights. One way to be faithful to this calling is by ensuring that young people are held accountable for harm they have caused in an age-appropriate way with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Sadly, this is not the case in our country. More than 2,500 youth in the U.S. have been sentenced to life without parole and condemned to die in prison—and none in the rest of the world. The United States is the only country that sentences youth to life without parole. Most of these individuals had no prior records and committed these crimes alongside adult co-defendants, many of whom received lesser sentences. In addition, African American youth are sentenced to life without parole at a per capita rate that is *10 times* that of white youth.

Common sense and science tell us that children are not simply little adults. Their brains—not just their bodies—are not yet fully developed. They do not have the adult levels of judgment or ability to assess risks, and they are more susceptible to peer pressure than adults. Because of their unique characteristics as youth, they are also especially amenable to rehabilitation and capable of reforming their behavior. It is for these reasons that the United States Supreme Court ruled June 2012, in the landmark *Miller v. Alabama* case, that mandatory life without parole sentences are unconstitutional for children.

Enclosed in this letter is a list of activities and ways in which [your/our] congregation can get involved to abolish this harsh sentence for youth as well as resources for spreading the news. These include a fast fact sheet, action steps, a list of resources, suggested bulletin announcements, and sample prayers of faith and healing. I would like [your/our] faith community to join other communities across the country in the movement to abolish this harsh sentence for youth. Together—in prayer, service, and action—I hope that we can advocate on behalf of all children sentenced to die in prison.

Thank you for considering this invitation to join our movement. If I can be of any additional service, please contact me at the following phone number (XXX) XXX - XXXX, or write back to me at the following address: XXXXXXX@xxx.xxx

Thank you,

[Your Name]

## Sample Introduction Letter #2

*Use this as a form letter/e-mail or as a guide for a phone conversation with a faith leader*

[MY RETURN ADDRESS]

[Date]

Dear [Name of Faith Leader],

My name is [your name], and I am a member of the National Family Network (NFN)—a national organization of family members and loved ones of youth serving life without parole. I am writing to you and other faith leaders to raise awareness about a very serious issue in our country regarding youth in our justice system.

Our faith tells us that all children—even those convicted of serious crimes—have the capacity for redemption and should not be defined by their worst moments. As people of faith, we know that we have a moral responsibility to advocate for the most vulnerable in our society, especially our children, and uphold their dignity and human rights, rather than discard them for life. Young people should be held accountable for harm they have caused in an age-appropriate way with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Sadly, this is not the case in our country. There are more than 2,500 youth who have been sentenced to life without parole and condemned to die in prison in the United States—and none in the rest of the world. The United States is the only country that sentences youth to life without parole. Most of these individuals had no prior records and committed these crimes alongside adult co-defendants, many of whom received lesser sentences. In addition, African American youth are sentenced to life without parole at a per capita rate that is *10 times* that of white youth.

Common sense and science tell us that children are not simply little adults. Their brains—not just their bodies—are not yet fully developed. They do not have the adult levels of judgment or ability to assess risks, and they are more susceptible to peer pressure than adults. Because of their unique characteristics as youth, they are also especially amenable to rehabilitation and capable of reforming their behavior. It is for these reasons that the United States Supreme Court ruled in June 2012, in the landmark *Miller v. Alabama* case, that mandatory life without parole sentences are unconstitutional for children.

Enclosed in this letter is a list of activities and ways in which [your/our] congregation can get involved to abolish this harsh sentence for youth as well as resources for spreading the news. These include a fast fact sheet, action steps, a list of resources, suggested bulletin announcements, and sample prayers of faith and healing. Additionally, I am requesting an opportunity to speak to your congregation or ministries concerning this very important topic, which impacts our entire society.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please contact me by phone at (XXX) XXX - XXXX, or by email at XXXXXXXXXXX@XXXX.com, or by writing to the address above. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

## **Prayers**

*Use these resources as tools to engage faith leaders*

### **For a Jewish Prayer:**

[http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Jewish\\_Prayer.pdf](http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Jewish_Prayer.pdf)

### **For an Islamic Prayer:**

[http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Islamic\\_Sermon.pdf](http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Islamic_Sermon.pdf)

### **For an Indigenous Prayer:**

[http://www.healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Ind\\_Prayer\\_for\\_Week\\_of\\_Faith\\_&\\_Healing.pdf](http://www.healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Ind_Prayer_for_Week_of_Faith_&_Healing.pdf)

### **For Christian Prayers:**

[http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Prayers\\_of\\_Faithful\\_Christian.pdf](http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Prayers_of_Faithful_Christian.pdf)

[http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Prayer\\_for\\_Justice.pdf](http://healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Prayer_for_Justice.pdf)

### **For Christian Prayers in Spanish:**

[http://www.healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Oraciones\\_De\\_Los\\_Fieles\\_Cristiano.pdf](http://www.healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Oraciones_De_Los_Fieles_Cristiano.pdf)

[http://www.healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Oracion\\_Por\\_La\\_Justicia.pdf](http://www.healingjusticecoalition.org/documents/Oracion_Por_La_Justicia.pdf)

For more information including resources and prayers go to :  
[\[http://healingjusticecoalition.org\]](http://healingjusticecoalition.org)

## Scripture Passages:

*Relevant Scripture references that can be a part of your introduction to faith leaders*

### Islamic Tradition:

*“And God has made you mates (and companions) of your own nature, and made you children and grandchildren from your mates, and provided for you sustenance of the best.” (Quran 16:72)*

*“O Lord! Grant us delight in our spouses and children, and help us to be a model among those who are conscious of You.” (Quran 25:74)*

*“We sent Our Messengers with clear evidence, and sent with them the Book and the Balance so that people would maintain justice.” (Quran 57:25)*

*“Believers, be steadfast for the cause of Allah and just in bearing witness. Let not a group’s hostility make you deviate from justice. Be just for it is closer to piety.” (Quran 5:8)*

*“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin and whether it be against rich or poor: For Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you swerve, and if you distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well acquainted with all that you do.” (Nisa, 135)*

### Judeo – Christian Tradition:

*“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.” (Isaiah 10:1-2)*

*“I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” (Isaiah 42:6-7)*

*“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” (Hebrews 13:3)*

*“He has shown you, O Mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)*

*“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Luke 18:15-17)*

*“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 18:10)*

*“If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” (Matthew 18:12-14)*

## Sample Bulletin

*Here is a sample bulletin that can be posted in places of worship*

### Protecting Hope and Redemption for Our Children

As people of faith we have a moral responsibility to advocate for the most vulnerable in our society, especially our children. We know that all children—even those convicted of serious crimes—have the capacity for redemption and should not be defined by their worst moments.

More than 2,500 youth in the United States have been sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, a sentence that never offers a chance for case review. Unless laws change, these children will die in prison. Most of these individuals had no prior records and committed these crimes alongside adult co-defendants, many of whom received lesser sentences. African American youth are sentenced to life without parole at a per capita rate that is 10 times that of white youth. The United States is the only country in the world that sentences children to die in prison.

Instead of sentencing youth to life in prison without parole, they should be held accountable in an age-appropriate way, with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society. As the recent U.S. Supreme Court *Miller v. Alabama* decision makes clear, youth cannot be considered as culpable as their adult counterparts and must be sentenced as such. The decision eliminated mandatory life without parole sentences for children.

We must continue to advocate for an end to all life without parole sentences for youth. Eliminating this sentence reflects the human dignity of our children that we, as people of faith, are called to protect. Please consider taking action in some of the ways listed below.

1. **Join advocates calling for just alternatives.** *The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth* is a national coalition working to end the practice of sentencing youth to life without parole. They work so that young people convicted of serious crimes are held accountable for the harm they have caused in an age-appropriate way and so that law reflects our human rights, values, and moral beliefs and the fundamental difference between youth and adults. Support their statement of principles or use it to find local organizations that support the fair sentencing of youth:  
[www.fairsentencingofyouth.org/home/statement-of-principles/](http://www.fairsentencingofyouth.org/home/statement-of-principles/)
2. **Support alternative programs** that offer positive opportunities to young people – athletics, faith-based sponsored after-school events, tutoring, and literacy programs.
3. **Contact your federal representatives.** Ask them to ratify the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. For more information see:  
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>
4. **Support legislation to eliminate life sentences for youth.** The U.S. Supreme Court, in its ruling in *Miller v. Alabama*, deemed that mandatory sentences of life in prison without the possibility of parole are unconstitutional when applied to people who were younger than 18 at the time of their crimes. As states create new legislation in the wake of that ruling, it is more important than ever to support positive legislation in your state. If you are interested in getting connected to legislative advocacy, contact the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth to find out if your state has active legislation and how you can help. Email:  
[info@fairsentencingofyouth.org](mailto:info@fairsentencingofyouth.org)
5. **Begin the conversation** within your community about the manner in which we treat youth convicted of crimes in the United States.

For more information on *the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth* or to sign up for news go to:  
[www.fairsentencingofyouth.org](http://www.fairsentencingofyouth.org) • email: [info@fairsentencingofyouth.org](mailto:info@fairsentencingofyouth.org)

## Activities

*Here are some activities in which faith leaders or their communities can engage*

- *Place a bulletin* in your faith organization's newsletter.
- *Discuss juvenile justice* in your weekly faith service.
- *Host a candle-light vigil in your faith community* and speak with your faith leader about the possibility of having an event in remembrance of youth in the justice system.
- *Host a discussion* after a faith service in your community about juvenile justice and sentencing youth to life without parole.
- *Support neighborhood groups* that work to create cooperative relationships between neighbors, faith communities, and law enforcement to create a safe and secure community.
- *Support or volunteer* with programs that promote victim ministry in your place of worship.
- *Support or volunteer* with the ministry at your local detention center.
- *Provide spiritual, material, or emotional* assistance to those re-entering society, both youth and adult.
- *Post a flyer* in your place of worship [see attached document].
- *Receive Action Alerts* and keep up-to-date on important state legislation and news; sign up by contacting [info@fairsentencingofyouth.org](mailto:info@fairsentencingofyouth.org)

## Getting Involved

*Here are other things you can do to get involved either locally or on the national level:*

- **Connect with the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth**
  - Ask the CFSY if it has any **organizers in your state** coordinating advocacy efforts in support of particular legislation
  - Sign up **for e-mail** and news updates from the CFSY by contacting [info@fairsentencingofyouth.org](mailto:info@fairsentencingofyouth.org)
  - Have your faith organization become an **Official Supporter** and sign the CFSY's **Statement of Principles**
  - Follow the CFSY on **Facebook** and **Twitter** (@theCFSY)
  
- **Partner with local organizations**
  - Seek out other supportive organizations on the local level to **raise awareness** about youth serving life without parole in your state
  
- **Host a public meeting**
  - Ask your faith leader at your community if you **could host an educational meeting** at your place of worship
  
- **Keep the CFSY informed**
  - The CFSY looks forward to helping you in any way possible, please keep us informed of your advocacy efforts
  - Use the contact information below to connect with the CFSY:

**Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth  
1319 F Street NW, Suite 303  
Washington, DC 20004**

•  
**[info@fairsentencingofyouth.org](mailto:info@fairsentencingofyouth.org) • 202-289-4672  
[www.fairsentencingofyouth.org](http://www.fairsentencingofyouth.org)**

