

# A bill to seal juvenile records gains momentum in Olympia

Testimony ran positive on Rep. Ruth Kagi's measure to keep certain, non-violent juvenile records confidential.

**By John Stang**

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**Two views clashed Monday:** Kids shouldn't be haunted for a lifetime by a dumb teenage mistake vs. juvenile courts shouldn't operate in secret.

The Washington Senate's Human Services & Corrections Committee took testimony on a bill that would make juvenile records confidential except in the case of serious crimes. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Ruth Kagi, D-Seattle, said its purpose is to ensure that a non-violent crime committed by a young person doesn't haunt him or her forever, preventing them from being accepted into college, landing a job or even renting an apartment.

"This bill tries to balance public safety and the importance for a youth to have a life after they turn 18," Kagi told the committee. "When a juvenile commits a crime, the question is should they have to carry that crime with them for the rest of their lives."

In 1977, Washington opened juvenile offender records up to the public. Since then, a person can seal his or her juvenile file on a case-by-case basis, but the criteria for sealing has become stricter over the years. Kagi's bill would limit access to non-violent juvenile files to the court, the appropriate attorneys and the defendant. Exceptions include sex crimes, serious violent crimes, first-degree arson, second-degree assault of a child, second-degree kidnapping, leading organized crime and malicious placement of an explosive.

**The House passed Kagi's bill unanimously (96-0) on Feb. 14.**

In Monday committee hearing, critics of Kagi's bill argued against semi-blanket confidentiality, saying it would let courts operate in secret. News organizations, they contended, need access to individual court files to make sure the system is working properly. Whether, for example, the juvenile justice system treats minority youth differently than white kids. Supporters of keeping juvenile files open pointed to the 1988 King County courthouse suicide of Judge Gary Little, whom the Seattle Post-Intelligencer was about to expose as a molester of juvenile defendants, and to the 2013 "Kids For Cash" scandal in Pennsylvania in which judges were bribed to send juvenile offenders to privately-owned detention centers.

"If you throw a blanket over the juvenile justice system, you're saying we trust that everyone in the juvenile system is perfect," said Bill Will of the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association. John Woodring, representing the Retail Housing Association, argued that Kagi's bill would make it difficult for landlords to screen prospective tenants. But the majority of Monday's testimony was in favor of Kagi's bill, primarily on the grounds that a teenage mistake should not ruin a person's entire life. About 95 percent of

juvenile crimes are non-violent, said King County Superior Court Judge Mary Yu, who supports Kagi's bill. "We hold them accountable (during their teen years) while teaching them acceptable behavior," she said.

"A childhood mistake should not be a barrier to people who've dealt with their mistakes," said Shoreline Police Chief Shawn Ledford, adding that King County Sheriff John Urquhart shares his opinion.

Angie Barnies is 36, a military wife living in Spokane. As a young teen in a bad home situation, she was arrested for stealing. That juvenile misstep has followed her ever since. She has no problem getting hired on military bases, Barnies told the committee. But she has never been able to survive the off-base background checks.

"I can work on a federal base," said Barnies. "But not in Washington."

*John Stang is a longtime Inland Northwest newspaper reporter who earned a Masters of Communications in Digital Media degree at the University of Washington. He can be reached by writing editor@crosscut.com.*

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