

To Continue the Legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), The Children's Defense Fund - New York Demands the Expansion of Voting Rights for 16- and 17-Year-Olds

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 17th, 2022

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NEW YORK, N.Y. -- Children's Defense Fund- New York (CDF-NY) is committed to building on the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the work of young Civil Rights Movement activists in creating radical social change for our community, especially for our children and youth. The legacy of Dr. King and the young people he worked with continues today as the dream of equality and the fight for our democracy lives on. Today we commemorate the legacy of Dr. King by calling for the passage of NYS Senate Bill S366, which would lower the voting age in New York State to 16 years and require that students receive education in civics and be allowed to register to vote in the classroom, and for the passage of H.J.Res.23, which would lower the voting age in America to 16 years old.

Young people have led every major movement in American history over the last 100 years, whether leading the fight for school desegregation, the passage of the DREAM Act and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, or the protests for Black Lives Matter and March For Our Lives. Young people have led the way to transform our country, by demanding justice and realizing radical social change. In times of radical social transformation, the true power of the people is grounded on exercising our full democratic right to get out the vote. 16 and 17-year-old youth are organizing protests, educating their peers, leading and sustaining movements, and if they can hold these leadership roles and responsibilities in their community, they should have the right to vote.

We need to organize, educate, and mobilize our 16 and 17-year-old youth for radical social change by getting out the vote. We need to train and equip our youth with civic engagement, leadership development, and organizing skills to mobilize and unleash our collective power around critical issues impacting children, youth, their families, and their communities, and the passage of NYS Senate Bill S366 and H.J.Res.23 can assist us to realize the dream we have for our democracy. Young people believe in fairness, equity, and justice, and we need to account for their voices in our democracy at the polls.

CDF-NY also calls on our legislature to end voter suppression and restore and protect our right to vote by passing the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. Authentic social change can only occur when we, the people, are counted at the polls. Our democracy depends on ensuring all votes are accounted for so that we can see the fruit of our labor-- our organizing, educating, and mobilizing to the polls-- come to full fruition. Passing the NYS Senate Bill S366, H.J.Res.23, Freedom

to Vote Act, and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act would profoundly impact our democracy. For the future of our democracy, the CDF-NY urges Congress and our New York State legislature to pass these essential voting rights bills.

"I am 16 years old and have already developed a deep understanding of social issues and possible solutions to dismantle oppressive systems holding back my community. I have a deep understanding of the role our democracy plays in disrupting the status quo and how important it is to elect the right people into office," said **Briana Deloatch, CDF-NY Beat the Odds® Scholar & Youth Advocate**. "I urge our elected officials to lower the voting age to 16 because our young people are not only ready to cast their votes, but they are also more than capable of handling this responsibility. Our communities already benefit from everything youth have to offer, and the NYS Senate Bill S366 and H.J.Res.23 will maximize the full power of young people and ensure our impact in elections is felt across our communities."

"Being 16, you realize more of the world that we live in and its problems," said **Isabel Fernandez, The Brotherhood Sister Sol**. "Being 16 and a part of today's youth shouldn't stop me from making a change. No, I'm not just 'a child.' I'm a person in my community who sees what needs to be changed, and it's up to me to assist in giving rise to a change. Don't be surprised when the youth are no longer forced to be in silence."

"At 16 and 17 years old, we are already active agents in our society. We are expected to follow laws, yet have little power in lawmaking. We have so many adult responsibilities in schools and outside of schools, like volunteering, helping run programs, and working, yet we do not have access to the same social benefits or rights. For those of us who work, we pay taxes yet have no representation. We show up to rallies and marches to advocate for issues we care about, yet we can't vote for those same issues. That is not right," said **Yaires Reynoso, CDF-NY Beat the Odds® Scholar & Youth Advocate**. "We need to be empowered to participate in our democracy and not disempowered. Passing the NYS Senate Bill S366 and H.J.Res.23 will give us the right to participate in all aspects of our democracy and empower our leadership development."

"At 16, we begin to develop as citizens in this world, so why do we not have the right to vote?," said **Dakarai Lindsay, The Brotherhood Sister Sol**. "Society puts enough on us that we have no control over, so why not give us a way to change it. Or do you want us to stay in a 'child's place' forever?"

"As a first-time voter in 2021, I had so many questions about how to be an informed voter and the voting process. I wished my school would have provided an opportunity to register to vote and get civic education alongside my peers, said **Khushayah Morris, CDF-NY Beat the Odds® Scholar & Youth Advocate**. "The passage of NYS Senate Bill S366 would have made that possible. I urge the New York Legislature to listen to our voices-- the youth-- and give us the opportunity of enhancing our education with this historic bill. Voting is powerful because it is one of the ways I can exercise my power and right as a citizen. I was ready to vote at 16, so why should we have to wait to exercise our power as US citizens."

"Educating our children is not just about facts and figures, but about arming them with the tools they need to think critically and to advocate for themselves and their communities," said **Zakiyah Ansari, Advocacy Director, Alliance for Quality Education**. "Children deserve a voice in our society and an opportunity to cultivate their own vision for a just world. Now more than ever, as students walk out in protest due to unsafe conditions at school while struggling to learn remotely amidst a myriad of intersecting crises, the ability to register to vote as sixteen-year-olds and receive a strong foundation in

civic engagement cannot be considered a privilege, but an absolute right. Alliance for Quality Education strongly supports the passage of Senate Bill S366 as a critical step to building the next generation of bold and informed leadership."

"Voting at ages 16 and 17 will ensure that the elected officials who set policies that affect the lives of 16- and 17-year-olds every day are listening to their voices and addressing their concerns," said **Brandon Klugman, Associate Director of Campaigns, Generation Citizen and Vote16USA**. "We also know that effective civics education increases participation in elections and sets students up for a lifetime of engaged and informed participation in our democracy. We are proud to stand with young leaders in calling for the passage of S366."

The Children's Defense Fund-New York (CDF-NY) has a unique approach to improving conditions for children, combining research, public education, policy development, direct services, and advocacy. A recognized authority in the endeavor to protect New York children and strengthen their families, CDF-NY serves as a resource and partner for children, families and organizations throughout New York State.