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Build hope into juvenile sentencing

Jeff Gerritt's May 3 [column](#), "Change the juvenile lifer law," struck a welcome tone when it noted: "There are moral, legal and constitutional problems with Michigan's juvenile lifer law."

Without question, offenders should be held accountable for their crimes. But Michigan's juvenile life-without-parole statute sends the message that any youth who commits a dreadful crime is beyond redemption. This is not only morally problematic; it also makes for bad public policy.

Treating a 14-year-old youth as a mature adult is simplistic and negates the importance of, and possibility for, correction. It is critical for judges to have the flexibility to view all the circumstances of a particular crime, and to mete out justice accordingly. Yet by prohibiting even a remote possibility for a reformed individual to be paroled later in life, Michigan law is failing to promote a genuine rehabilitative component of criminal justice.

Four years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roper v. Simmons* abolished the death penalty for juveniles, citing the emotional and developmental differences between adult and juvenile offenders. The court recognized that the state is in no position to take from a youth his potential to "attain a mature understanding of his own humanity."

The House Judiciary Committee has the opportunity to move the Legislature in the direction paved by the nation's high court. It is time for Michigan to humanize the state's morally flawed juvenile sentencing laws.

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