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Cassandra Villanueva, director of organizing and advocacy for the Partnership for Safety and Justice, leads a rally at Pioneer Courthouse Square Saturday to raise awareness of the social and personal harm caused by policies that allow young people to be punished as adults. PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

## When Justice Fails

### Advocating for children tried as adults

BY MICHAEL LEIGHTON  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Unfair punishment for juveniles under Oregon's mandatory minimum sentencing laws moved to center stage Saturday when supporters of reform joined together at Pioneer Courthouse Square for what they called a "community awareness and healing event."

Currently 639 youth are behind bars in Oregon. Over 300 of them were tried as adults and are serving the same sentence that an adult would serve.

Cassandra Villanueva, director of organizing and advocacy for the Partnership for Safety and Justice, said that's too many to lock up without better alternatives to get them on the right path.

"Young people who commit crimes need to be held ac-

countable, but accountable as what they are - children, not adults," she said. "And like all other young people, they need to be given the greatest opportunities to succeed that we can give them."

Proponents of the mandatory minimum laws say they were designed to be tough on crime, but Villanueva said they aren't making communities safer, while branding kids with criminal records that do them more harm than good in adulthood.

Nabeeh Mustafa, who has the perspective of a father with a child incarcerated, is part of Portland's black community and he attended the Portland rally.

He said more young men and increasingly young women are being "injured and devalued by this inhumane system."

The effect of a life-long sentence can prevent youth for

rebuilding their lives and gaining employment, housing and in some cases, an education.

"Society does not benefit," Mustafa said. "You have all these young men in the system with Measure 11 sentences (7 and 1/2 year minimum) who will be released at some point. They face the very real prospect of being released back into the larger society with a huge deficit and no ability to compete in a job market that is already difficult for those without college degrees."

Villanueva said Oregon could be doing a better job paying for the social and community services that help prevent crime and support victims of crime. She explained that these types of assistance help break the cycle of crime.

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