

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 4, 2008

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski  
Chairwoman  
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice  
and Science  
503 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice  
and Science  
110 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Mikulski and Ranking Member Shelby:

We write to express our strong support for continued funding of the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act in FY 2009. This measure, which received \$5 million in fiscal years 2006 and 2007 and \$6.5 million for FY 2008, provides states and local governments with resources to plan and implement initiatives for people with mental illnesses involved with the criminal justice system in order to increase public safety, reduce state and local spending, and improve the lives of people with mental illnesses and their families.

This important program was signed into law by President Bush in 2004 and authorizes a \$50 million grant program to be administered by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ). The bill received unanimous, bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress and is supported by a broad spectrum of leaders representing the diverse fields of law enforcement, corrections, the courts, and mental health.

State and local governments can use the grants for a broad range of activities, including mental health courts, mental health and substance abuse treatment for incarcerated mentally ill offenders, community reentry services, and cross-training of criminal justice and mental health personnel. The grants also promote improved training of local law enforcement officers to help them identify and improve their response to people with mental illnesses.

According to a study by the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, 16% of those incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons – more than 300,000 – suffer from mental disorders. The Bureau of Justice Statistics also estimates that the prevalence of youth with mental disorders in our juvenile justice facilities is even higher. Most of these individuals are not violent criminals, but rather low-level offenders. Incarceration is the most costly way to deal with a non-violent offender with a mental disorder. The Mentally Ill Offender program provides assistance to states and communities to mount new programs or expand existing programs that can both reduce costs and help these offenders return to productive lives.

The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health concluded that offenders with mental disorders frequently do not receive appropriate mental health care when they are put in jail, nor when they reenter the community following their discharge. As a result, the Commission found that these individuals quickly cycle back into the justice system. The Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction program is an important step at addressing mentally ill offenders in a collaborative, commonsense manner.

The grants available through the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act are already in high demand. Of the 250 grant applications submitted in 2006, only 11% were funded due to the availability of funds, awarding only 28 communities with additional resources to plan, implement or enhance their justice-mental health programs. In 2007, an additional 27 communities in 16 states received grant awards, which represented a significant improvement, but still left the vast majority of communities without funding for much-needed programs.

We are requesting that funding be provided in the FY 2009 appropriations bill for this important program. By doing so, we will help criminal justice officials whose jails, prisons, and juvenile holding facilities have become our country's largest mental health institutions.

Sincerely,

Pat Leahy

Barack Obama

Jim Cooper

Whitman

Chuck Schumer

Sheldon Brown

Sheldon Whitehouse

Bill Clinton

Norm Feingold

Tommy

Allen

Chuck Grassley

Dick Lugar

John F. Kerry

Cory McCaskey

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