

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 13, 2007

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 are writing to express our strong support for funding for the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act in FY 2008. This measure, which received \$5 million in both FY 2006 enacted and FY 2007 reported appropriations bills, provides states and local governments with resources to design and implement initiatives for people with mental illness in the criminal justice and juvenile justice systems.

The Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act of 2004 (Public Law 108-414) 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. Congress authorized \$50,000,000 for the program to develop initiatives to reduce costs, improve public safety, and help these offenders return to productive lives.

State and local governments can use the grants for a broad range of activities for adults and juveniles, including mental health courts, mental health and substance abuse treatment for incarcerated mentally ill offenders, community re-entry services, and cross-training of criminal justice, law enforcement, and mental health personnel. The grants also promote improved training of local law enforcement to help them identify and improve their response to people with mental illness. The Bureau of Justice Assistance within the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) administers the program.

The grants available through the Mentally Ill Offender program have been in unusually high demand. Of the 250 grant applications submitted in 2006, only 11 percent (27 communities) have received awards due to the limited federal funding. These grant monies are helping to improve communities' ability to address the needs of people with mental illness in the justice system.

Approximately five percent of the US population has a serious mental illness. DOJ reports, however, that about 16 percent of the population in prison or jail has a mental illness. DOJ also estimates that the prevalence of youth with mental disorders in our juvenile justice facilities is even higher. Nearly half the inmates in prison with a mental illness were incarcerated for committing a nonviolent crime, although 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 design or improve their mental health and criminal justice collaborative programs.

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 re-enter the community following their discharge. As a result, the Commission found that these individuals quickly recycle back into the justice system. The Mentally Ill Offender program is an important step forward in addressing the needs of mentally ill offenders in a collaborative, common sense manner.

We request that funding be provided at the maximum amount available in the FY 2008 appropriations bill for this important program. By doing so, we will help law enforcement, court, and corrections officials whose dockets, jails, prisons, and juvenile holding facilities are coping with more persons with mental illness than our country's mental health institutions.

Sincerely,

Patrick Leahy

Ed Kennedy

Bill Blaine

Chuck Grassley

Dick Durbin

Mark Warner

Jon Tester

John Warner

Tom Harkin

Benjamin L. Cardin

Sheldon Whitehouse

Michael J. Chaberski

Allen S. Boyd

Bob Sanders