

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April __, 2012

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
Chairwoman,
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Commerce, Justice, and Science
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

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

Dear Chairwoman Mikulski and Ranking Member Shelby,

As you begin work on the FY 2014 Commerce, Justice, and Science (CJS) Appropriations bill, we write to express our strong support for funding of the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act (MIOTCRA). This program enhances public safety, saves money, and improves the lives of people with mental illnesses.

People with mental health conditions disproportionately are arrested and incarcerated. According to a Department of Justice report, approximately 45 percent of federal inmates, 56 percent of state inmates, and 64 percent of jail inmates displayed symptoms of a mental health condition. A former Executive Director of the National Sheriffs Association has observed that “in many jurisdictions in the nation, the county’s jails hold more people with severe psychiatric illnesses than any psychiatric facility in the county.” And the President of the Major County Sheriffs Association has said that many inmates belong in treatment programs, not behind bars.

Using our criminal justice system as a mental health system doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t make sense for law enforcement officers, who put their lives at risk every time they are called upon to intervene in a mental health crisis. It doesn’t make sense for courts, which are inundated with cases involving people with mental illnesses. It doesn’t make sense for people who have mental health conditions, who often would benefit more from treatment and intensive supervision than from traditional punishment. And it certainly doesn’t make sense for taxpayers, who foot the bill for high incarceration costs and overcrowded corrections facilities.

MIOTCRA supports innovative programs that address this problem. It funds crisis intervention teams, which give law enforcement officers the resources and training they need to identify and respond to mental health crises in their communities. MIOTCRA also funds mental health courts that direct people with mental illnesses into appropriate treatment and supervision programs. To date, MIOTCRA has funded 99 mental health courts and other court-based initiatives, supported 68 local police and county sheriff departments, and provided 255 grants to 46 states.

MIOTCRA was enacted in 2004, and it was reauthorized in 2008, both times with broad bipartisan support. A current reauthorization bill has nearly 40 co-sponsors from both chambers and both sides of the aisle, and that bill has been endorsed by more than 200 leading law enforcement, mental health, and criminal justice organizations from across the country.

As recent events have increased national attention on our mental health system, we believe that this is an appropriate time to increase funding for this important program. In addition, we are very disappointed that the President's FY2014 budget once again proposed that MIOTCRA be consolidated into a single problem-solving courts initiative. The Committee has rejected this proposal in years past, explaining in Committee Reports that MIOTCRA funds a distinct set of activities focused on the unique challenges facing our criminal justice, law enforcement, and mental health communities. We ask that the Committee once again reject any attempt to combine MIOTCRA with other programs.

We appreciate your leadership on the Commerce, Justice, and Science appropriations bill for FY 2014, and we thank you in advance for your continued support of the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act.

Sincerely,