

STATEMENT ON THE JUSTICE & MENTAL HEALTH COLLABORATION ACT

Senator Al Franken

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate this Committee's strong, bipartisan support for the Justice & Mental Health Collaboration Act. America has 5% of the world's population, but we have 25% of its inmates. One of our biggest problems is that we've used our criminal justice system as a substitute for a well-functioning mental health system; we've sort of criminalized mental illness and addiction.

The Sheriff for Hennepin County in Minnesota put it well when he wrote that the largest mental health facilities in the United States are not hospitals – they're jails. He said that about 30% of the inmates under his supervision have mental illnesses, and, quote, "quite frankly, many of these folks do not belong in our jail."

And here's what a Minnesota judge wrote about inmates with mental illnesses: "While they are sitting in jail, they often recede further into the depths of their illness. They present a danger to themselves; they present a danger to fellow inmates; and they present a danger to the good men and women who run the jails."

Time and again, we've heard similar testimony before this Committee. I'll always remember Senator Durbin's hearing on the use of solitary confinement. And during our hearings on gun violence, U.S. Attorney Tim Heaphy and Police Chief James Johnson were among the many witnesses who have told this Committee about the relationship between our criminal justice and mental health systems.

This is a moral issue: non-violent people with mental illness often would benefit more from treatment and supervision than from time languishing behind bars.

But this also is a public safety issue: our law enforcement personnel put their lives on the line when they are called on to be first responders in mental health crises. And this is an economics issue: taxpayers needlessly foot the bill for high incarceration costs when we could be saving money through diversion programs.

The Justice & Mental Health Collaboration Act authorizes investments in court-administered treatment and counseling programs so that, in appropriate cases, people with mental illnesses can get the help they need. The bill funds police academies and crisis intervention teams so that law enforcement personnel are equipped to handle safely the challenges they face on a daily basis. It includes accountability measures and prioritizes evidence-based practices so that we know we're spending money wisely. And it has a special provision to help veterans who are struggling with PTSD and addiction.

In Minnesota, we're doing some really good things to improve collaboration between our criminal justice and mental health systems. We have outstanding crisis intervention programs, mental health courts, and veterans' treatment courts. Part of my job as a Senator is to help Minnesota address the challenges it's facing, and another part of my job is to find out what Minnesota is doing well and to share those solutions to the rest of the country. This bill does both.

I'd like to thank the bill's many co-sponsors, particularly Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Grassley, Senator Hatch, Senator Graham, and the other members of this Committee who have worked with me on this legislation. I'd also like to thank Senator Johanns and Congressmen Rich Nugent, a former sheriff from Florida, and Congressman Bobby Scott for their leadership. We've worked together to find common ground on an issue of common interest, and, as a result, our bill now has been sponsored by a bipartisan coalition of nearly 60 members of Congress.

And perhaps as important as is its support in Congress, this bill has been endorsed by law enforcement leaders, mental health experts, veterans' organizations, and others. I'd like to submit for the record a letter of support from more than 225 organizations from across the nation, including the National Sheriffs Association, the ACLU, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and the National Association of Police Organizations.

I'd also like to submit letters of support from the Wounded Warrior Project, the American Legion, AMVETS, the Vera Institute, the Fraternal Order of Police, the Pretrial Justice Institute, the National Alliance on Mental Illness' Minnesota Chapter, and the Council on State Governments. And, finally, I'd like to submit a letter of support from former Senator Mike DeWine, who authored the original law in 2004 and testified in support of the Justice & Mental Health Collaboration Act during a Committee hearing in December.

I look forward to working with each of you as this bill becomes law.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.