

Testimony of

# **The Honorable Patrick Leahy**

July 30, 2003

Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy  
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee  
Hearing on "An Examination of S. 1194, The Mentally Ill Offender  
Treatment and Crime Reduction Act of 2003"  
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We hold a hearing today on The Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act, which Senator DeWine and I introduced last month. This is a good bipartisan bill that would help state and local governments deal effectively with an often overlooked problem - the extent to which mentally ill individuals commit crimes and recidivate without ever receiving appropriate attention from the mental health, law enforcement, or corrections systems. I welcome all of our witnesses today, and would like to offer a special welcome to Vermont State Senator John Campbell, who will testify today about efforts in our state to address this problem, and how this bill could help. Senator Campbell is the Majority Leader and a member of the Judiciary Committee, and he is also a former law enforcement officer. As a result, he has seen this issue from both an individual perspective and a broader policy perspective, and I look forward to hearing his insights today.

All too often, people with mental illness rotate repeatedly between the criminal justice system and the streets of our communities, committing a series of minor offenses. The ever scarcer time of our law enforcement officers is being occupied by these offenders, who divert them from more urgent responsibilities. Meanwhile, offenders find themselves in prisons or jails, where little or no appropriate medical care is available for them. This bill gives state and local governments the tools to break this cycle, for the good of law enforcement, corrections officers, the public safety, and mentally ill offenders themselves.

I held a Judiciary Committee hearing last June on the criminal justice system and mentally ill offenders. At that hearing, we heard from state mental health officials, law enforcement officers, corrections officials, and the representative of counties around our nation. All of our witnesses agreed that people with untreated mental illness are more likely to commit crimes, and that our state mental health systems, prisons and jails do not have the resources they need to treat the mentally ill, and prevent crime and recidivism. -We know that more than 16 percent of adults incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons have a mental illness, that about 20 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have serious mental health problems, and that up to 40 percent of adults who suffer from a serious mental illness will come into contact with the American criminal justice system at some point in their lives. We know these things, but we have not done enough about them at the Federal level, and our state and local officials need our help.

The bill does not mandate a "one size fits all" approach to addressing this issue. Rather, it allows grantees to use the funding authorized under the bill for mental health courts or other court-based programs, for training for criminal justice and mental health system personnel, and for better mental health treatment in our communities and within the corrections system. The funding is also generous enough to make a real difference, with \$100 million authorized for each of the next two fiscal years. This is an area where government spending can not only do good but can also save money in the long run - a dollar spent today to get mentally ill offenders effective medical care can save many dollars in law enforcement costs in the long run.

Indeed, this bill has brought law enforcement officers and mental health professionals together, as one can see from our witnesses today. I hope that we hear today and in the coming weeks about any improvements that we should make to this bill so that it truly addresses this issue in a way that is both compassionate and effective. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

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