

Statement of

The Honorable Russ Feingold

United States Senator
Wisconsin
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Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing on "Human Rights at Home: Mental Illness in U.S. Prisons and Jails"
Tuesday, September 15, 2009

Statement of U.S. Senator Russell D. Feingold

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing.

Mental illness is, unfortunately, a problem that is often ignored or unaddressed by the criminal justice system in this country. A report by the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments underscores the seriousness of this problem. Nearly 15% of men and 31% of women inmates have a serious mental illness, i.e. either bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or major depression. According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness, about 40% of adults with a serious mental illness will come into contact with the criminal justice system some time during their lives.

It is undisputed that if these mentally ill people had received adequate treatment in the first place, the vast majority would not have become involved in the criminal justice system. And once incarcerated, mentally ill inmates often have no access at all to treatment. Without the ability to receive adequate mental health care, these inmates can become very dangerous for both guards and other inmates.

Mentally ill inmates also cost significantly more to incarcerate than regular inmates, and they tend to serve longer sentences for identical crimes. One study of the Miami-Dade County jail found that the cost to incarcerate a mentally ill inmate is seven times higher and the sentence is likely to be eight times longer than for a person without mental illness who is arrested for the exact same offense.

Of course, law enforcement and correctional facilities are not necessarily entirely to blame for the problems arising out of this unique inmate population. Experts agree that prisons are ill-equipped to meet the needs of those with serious mental illnesses. I applaud the ongoing efforts throughout our country, even with very limited manpower and financial resources, to reform our justice system for mentally ill prisoners. However, the justice system needs Congress's leadership on this issue. More federal funding is needed to help address this problem in state and federal prisons and jails.

In 1963, President Kennedy signed a \$3 billion authorization that would have created a national network of community mental health facilities for the whole country. Unfortunately, none of that funding was appropriated, and today we allocate scant resources to support persons with mental

illnesses. Training for judges, correctional, law enforcement, and emergency response personnel is essential to ensuring adequate diagnosis and treatment of the mentally ill.

I am pleased that Chairman Durbin has organized this hearing and is calling attention to this important issue. I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses about how we can better address mental illness in U.S. prisons and jails.

Thank you.