

Testimony of
The Honorable Orrin Hatch

July 30, 2003

Statement of Chairman Orrin G. Hatch

Before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Hearing on

"An Examination of S. 1194, The Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act of 2003"

I am grateful for Senator DeWine's continued and tireless efforts in the field of mental health. I too have long been a supporter of legislation designed to assist those afflicted with mental health problems. A few examples include cosponsoring during the 105th Congress S. 543, the Mental Health Equitable Treatment Act, to require health insurance policies to give mental health claims the same treatment given to other health related claims and during the 107th Congress S. 525, the Child Health Insurance and Lower Deficit Act, to provide for Early Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment, which includes treatment for mental illnesses.

Another example of my support in this area includes favorably reporting Senator DeWine's legislation, S 1865 America's Law Enforcement and Mental Health Project, out of the Judiciary Committee during the 106th Congress which established mental health courts for nonviolent offenders with severe mental illnesses. That bill, which was signed into law by the President, provided grants to establish up to 125 mental health courts throughout the nation.

Those mental health courts permit non-violent offenders with serious mental illness to be diverted from jails and placed into appropriate community programs. That law also provides specialized training for law enforcement and judicial personnel to help them identify and address the unique needs of people with serious mental illness that come into contact with the criminal justice system. That was a good step towards assisting those mentally ill who are arrested for minor criminal offenses.

I continue to support increased training for law enforcement and judicial personnel. We should continue to increase efforts designed to interdict mentally ill individuals prior to their interaction with the criminal justice system, and, for those incarcerated, appropriate treatment of mentally ill offenders while in prison. If we can deal with mental illness issues as early and as continuously as possible, maybe we can halt the deterioration of mentally ill offenders and stop the revolving door to the prison system that so often ensnares those trapped by problems beyond their control.

We should continue working towards practical solutions for those suffering from mental illness. This hearing is a positive step in that direction. In the many years I have spent addressing mental health issues, I have come to the conclusion that the problems attendant to those suffering from mental health complications require bi-partisan action.

I look forward to hearing how these pilot programs have worked across the country. I also would like to receive the Department of Justice's views, considering the Department will play an important role in formulating the rules relating to the distribution of funds for this program. I appreciate the appearance by today's witnesses and look forward to their testimony.

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