

Keep the Promise Judiciary Hearing Testimony
Tuesday, November 27th, 2007

Criminal Justice Reform Proposals #4 & #8

Good afternoon Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Cheri Bragg and I am the Keep the Promise Coalition Coordinator. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today regarding the criminal justice proposals currently being considered by the State of Connecticut.

Keep the Promise was formed in the wake of the closing of two large State psychiatric hospitals: Fairfield Hills and Norwich Hospital. People living with mental illness, their families, and the public were promised that the money sustaining these hospitals would be transferred to community services to cost-effectively and humanely support people in their own communities. That promise has not been kept!

We are concerned that many of the proposals before you today are neither cost-effective for taxpayers nor in the best interests of people living with mental illness and their families. Keep the Promise is against Proposal #4 which includes using “up to **\$150million** to plan and construct a 1,200 bed medical & mental health facility for people under DOC custody.” This does not include the millions of dollars needed to sustain such a facility. In contrast, Proposal #4 allocates less than **\$2million** for re-entry programs. We feel that the State is clearly putting an emphasis on funding **costly institutionalization** as opposed to **proven, cost-effective community services**. We need to invest in solutions such as diversion, C.I.T. and other programs aimed at reducing the number of people being needlessly warehoused in prisons for low-level offenses due to untreated mental illness. **Prison is not the place to deliver effective mental health treatment!**

We also urge you to reconsider Proposal #8, the “3 strikes” proposal. Most people with mental illness who are imprisoned are there due to non-violent offenses. We feel that the proposed 3 strikes legislation, which includes many misdemeanors, would disproportionately affect people with mental illness and substance use challenges. We should be treating people who are ill in their communities, not warehousing them.

After the hospital closings in the mid-1990's, Coalition members asked for solutions to address the ensuing mental health crisis: namely housing and community services. Sadly, the situation is the same or even worse for many people today. We closed many long-term institutions for the right reasons: Treatment works given individualized, appropriate supports and services. Without needed services in place, many people slid right through their communities into revolving door emergency room visits, nursing homes, jails and prisons. Nationwide, jails and prisons have become our largest 'de facto' mental health treatment centers. The name of the institutions may have changed, but they are institutions nonetheless. This is not progress! This is the result of broken promises.

Keep the Promise urges you to fund fiscally sound, proven, humane solutions: Community services and housing, NOT expensive, ineffective, inhumane reinstitutionalization. We urge you to "Keep the Promise" to ALL citizens of Connecticut TODAY!

Thank you for listening and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Cheri Bragg
Keep the Promise Coordinator