

## **Testimony before the Public Health Committee**

**Support for S.B. 40 & S.B. 422 February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

Good morning/afternoon Senator Handley, Representative Sayers and honorable members of the Public Health Committee. My name is Cheri Bragg, and I am the Coordinator of the Keep the Promise Coalition. Keep the Promise was formed in 1999 in the years after two large state psychiatric hospitals closed. Coalition members came together to advocate for a comprehensive, community-based mental health service system to support people in the community. Keep the Promise supports SB 422, An Act Concerning Supportive Housing for Individuals with Mental Illness, and SB 40, An Act Concerning Supportive Housing.

SB 40 maintains the state's commitment to investing in Supportive Housing by annualizing \$3 million in debt services. This funding allows the state to fulfill the commitment made in last year's budget for the creation of new Supportive Housing units through the Next Steps Initiative. Keep the Promise is grateful to the Governor for her continued support. However, we are strongly advocating for the funding of 650 new units of Supportive Housing this year which is necessary in order to meet the need and demand for Supportive Housing as well as the growing capacity to create it.

Keep the Promise would also like to urge you today to pass S.B. 422, An Act Concerning Supportive Housing for Individuals with Mental Illness. This bill is a critical component of community services for people with mental illness which is currently nonexistent. Alternative to Incarceration programs have not traditionally accepted people with serious mental illnesses into their programs due to the complex combination of mental health and court support service needs. This bill will provide the much needed combination of a residential treatment program with the level of community supervision that will enable judges to divert individuals for whom there was previously no appropriate option. The state's failure to provide adequate housing and supports for people with mental illness continues to push many people with mental illness into the prison system where they are least able to cope, do not receive appropriate care, and are more likely to remain there. Many are non-violent offenders who do not belong in the prison system.

Experts tell us that prison is the worst possible environment for people experiencing severe psychiatric symptoms, yet only 50% of defendants with serious mental illness evaluated through the state's jail diversion program can actually be diverted – largely because the judge does not have any alternative. Implementing Supportive Housing in the form of residential alternative to incarceration programs will ensure that this population is served properly in the community instead of being needlessly warehoused

in our jails and prisons, contributing to the ever-growing problem of prison overcrowding. Let's stop putting people who are sick into prisons and start treating them appropriately in the community.

Please support SB 40 and SB 422. Thank you for your time.