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TESTIMONY 2013

S.B. 1185

Dear Memembers of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify in favor of S.B. 1185. Implementing a mental health pilot program in Harris County will boost public safety through targeted assistance for thousands of mentally ill individuals, thus saving taxpayers money in re-arrest and re-incarceration costs.

PUNITIVE APPROACHES TO MENTAL ILLNESS ARE COSTLY AND INEFFECTIVE, THREATENING PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

County jails are inappropriate environments for individuals with mental illness who need targeted assistance. In Harris County, which operates Texas' largest county jail (approximately 9,000 inmates¹), a high population of mentally individuals cycle through the jail, with over a quarter of inmates receiving psychotropic medication on any given day.² This is not only a costly approach that burdens local taxpayers; it fails to meet the long-term needs of individuals who will inevitably return to the community and likely re-offend without proper care.

Harris County could more efficiently spend its limited resources on this population – while keeping local communities safer – through a multi-year, service-oriented program that would offer mentally ill individuals the tailored assistance they need to live responsibly in the community, following their release from jail.

Also key, if such a program proves successful, it will serve as a model for other Texas jurisdictions struggling to address large populations of criminal justice system-involved individuals with mental health needs.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Without tailored assistance, people with mental health issues will continue to struggle to adapt and may turn to unlawful methods to survive.** In fact, hundreds of inmates with mental problems cycled in and out of Harris County jail five or more times from 2011 to 2012,³ a revolving door marked by high costs associated with policing, prosecuting, and re-incarcerating these individuals.
- **Addressing the various needs of jail inmates with mental illness comes at significant taxpayer expense.** A study by the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County and Harris County's Office of Budget and Management examined all releases from jail between January 1, 2004, and January 29, 2008, and found persons with mental illness represented 25% of all inmates but accounted for 37% of the cost of jail stays. The study also found that Harris County's annual cost for an inmate with mental illness was \$7,017 per year, compared to \$2,599 for other inmates (excluding police and court costs).⁴
- **Supportive housing is especially critical for people with mental health issues.** 17% of jail detainees with mental illness had been homeless at least once during the year prior to arrest, in contrast to 9% of those without mental illness.⁵ Furthermore, many members of the mentally ill homeless population rotate between the streets and shelters, emergency centers, and jail cells, and the costs to Harris County attributable to their increased re-arrest rates exceed \$14 million per year.⁶
- **Punitive approaches to mental illness are a clear example of a policy driven by public opinion rather than systematic analysis.** One theory is that incarcerating individuals with mental illness makes it an unattractive option to those who might consider committing another crime after they get out of jail. Unfortunately, the current laws and the lack of support for the mentally ill have not only failed to help those individuals, but have actually made it **more likely for them to continue to commit crimes**, since once an individual has a criminal record, finding legitimate work and safe housing becomes more difficult.

Solution offered on reverse.

COST-SAVING AND PUBLIC SAFETY-DRIVEN SOLUTION: SUPPORT S.B. 1185 BY SENATOR HUFFMAN

- **S.B. 1185 will create a 4-year mental health pilot program in Harris County, in specific efforts to reduce recidivism among people with mental illness.** Under this bill, the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) will develop a “criminal justice mental health service model” to initially address the needs of at least 200 participants, with redesigns of the model permitted as DSHS acquires more information about its performance. **The program will give access to available social, clinical, housing, and welfare services during the first weeks after a person’s release from jail.** S.B. 1185 also seeks the cooperation and critical input of a variety of local stakeholders and service providers, to assure that the most effective program is in place considering existing programs and strategies.

This preventive approach will provide the mentally ill with the resources to adapt and rehabilitate, keeping them from repeatedly re-offending and being re-incarcerated at massive expense.

- **S.B. 1185 requires the Harris County Commissioner to submit a report on the pilot program to the Legislature by the end of 2016, ensuring transparency and accountability.** This report will enable decision-makers to better understand the scope of the problem, be clear about the successes of the program, and potentially respond with appropriate policies to implement such programs in other Texas counties, and well as extend it in Harris County. Currently, the pilot program is scheduled to end in September of 2017.

CONCLUSION

Thank you again for allowing me this opportunity to testify in favor of S.B. 1185. Incarcerated individuals, especially those with a mental illness, have the best chance for success after release from jail when they are placed in an organized program that significantly helps them during the reentry process through access to critical services. To save the state and Harris County taxpayers money, to reduce the number of people in the local jail, to have safer communities, and to better assist those with mental illnesses, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition strongly urges you to support this bill.

References

¹ Texas Commission on Jail Standards. Abbreviated Population Report for 2/1/13. Page 4 of 9.

<http://www.tcjs.state.tx.us/docs/AbbreRptCurrent.pdf>.

² Dennis Spellman. “Bill Would Remove Most Mentally-ill from Texas County Jails.” *News 92 FM Houston*. March 6, 2013.

<http://news92fm.com/334131/bill-would-remove-most-mentally-ill-from-texas-county-jails/>.

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ Treatment Advocacy Center & National Sheriffs’ Association. “More mentally ill persons are in jails and prisons than hospitals: A survey of the states.” (2010): 84.

http://treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/final_jails_v_hospitals_study.pdf.

⁵ Mary L.Held, Carlie A. Brown, Lynda E. Frost, J. Scott Hickey, and David S. Buck. “Integrated Primary and Behavioral Health Care in Patient-Centered Medical Homes for Jail Releases with Mental Illness,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 39 (2012): 535.

⁶ David S. Buck, Carlie A. Brown, Scott Hickey. “The Jail Inreach Project: Linking Homeless Inmates Who Have Mental Illness With Community Health Services,” *Psychiatric Services* 62 (February 2011): 120.

http://psychiatryonline.org/data/Journals/PSS/1832/pss6202_0120.pdf.