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CSG Criminal Justice Leaders Say DOJ Numbers Highlight Need to Improve Response to People with Mental Illnesses

NEW YORK – Leaders of The Council of State Governments (CSG) Criminal Justice Program appreciate the Bureau of Justice Statistics' continuing efforts to study and draw attention to the large numbers of people with mental illnesses in the criminal justice system.

The BJS report released today, *Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates*, found that "more than half of all prison and jail inmates have mental health problems." The issue is of growing concern to state and local government officials.

"The BJS report confirms what we hear regularly from the staff on the front lines of our prisons and jails, as well as our court and law enforcement systems: that the number of people with mental illnesses in the criminal justice system is a growing problem we must address," said state Rep. Ward Loyd, R-Kan., co-chair of CSG's Public Safety and Justice Task Force. "We know there are specialized strategies to address these problems that can reduce the numbers highlighted in the report and increase public safety."

Many of these specialized strategies are outlined in the 2002 landmark Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project report on improving the response to people with mental illnesses who become involved with the criminal justice system. Communities across the country are now successfully using the kinds of collaborative approaches and innovative policies the Consensus report promotes—including initiatives that help reduce injuries and arrests in law enforcement encounters, enable courts to ensure accountability while meeting individuals' needs, and help corrections professionals reduce the numbers of individuals with mental illnesses who cycle through prisons and jails.

"In June 2006 there were more than 8,000 people on the active mental health caseload in prisons in New York State, which has the fourth largest prison population in the nation," said Public Safety and Justice Task Force co-chair Assemblyman Jeff Aubry, D-N.Y. "This isn't good for public safety, it's not good for the health of our communities, and it's not a good use of taxpayer dollars."

There is broad national support to address the problems highlighted by BJS's report. "At the federal level we have seen critical bipartisan leadership around this issue," said CSG Consensus Project Chair State Rep. Mike Lawlor, D-Conn. "The Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act of 2004 (MIOTCRA), which passed the U.S. House and Senate unanimously under the direction of Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), Rep. Ted Strickland (D-Ohio), and others provides much-needed support to the field."

Leaders of CSG's criminal justice program continue to call for lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to fund the MIOTCRA program at its authorized level of \$50 million (\$5 million was appropriated for fiscal year 2006). That amount would enable state and local officials to support collaborative initiatives to improve outcomes for people with mental illnesses involved in the criminal justice system.

For related resources and statistics go to <http://www.consensusproject.org/>.

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