

# SENATE DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

# Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Feb 14, 2007

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## **Senate Democrats Introduce Legislation to Create Mental Health Courts** *Bills will ensure appropriate treatment of people with mental illness and save critical funding*

LANSING- Judges can direct people with mental illness charged with minor offenses to treatment instead of prison under legislation Senate Democrats introduced today. Senate bills 199 and 200 will create Mental Health Courts, modeled after Michigan's Drug Courts, and will ensure appropriate sentencing and treatment for people with mental illness. As Michigan faces an unprecedented budget crisis, this initiative will also ensure the best use of limited resources.

"Many people with mental illness are coming in contact with the criminal justice system for no other reason than they are off their medication or lack access to treatment," said Sen. Liz Brater (D-Ann Arbor), lead sponsor of the mental health courts legislation. "The vast majority of people with mental illness who are arrested are charged with minor, nonviolent offenses. We need to make sure that they are getting treatment in the mental health system, rather than in the prison system."

In the 1990s, the state closed 15 of Michigan's 21 mental hospitals. Many people discharged from these facilities no longer have access to appropriate care. As a result, they often go without medication and treatment. When in the acute phase of their illness, they may come in contact with law enforcement and are often sentenced to prison terms. People with mental illness are often unable to comply with prison rules. They may then be put in solitary confinement or kept longer in prison. Proper mental health treatment can prevent the incidents that land many people with mental illness in prison.

"Mental health courts can make a real change in people's lives and make sense for communities," said Senate Democratic Leader Mark Schauer (D-Battle Creek). "Treating people with mental illness appropriately is the right thing to do and makes the most of our limited resources."

Nationwide there are almost 300 mental health jail diversion programs. They have experienced great success in terms of rehabilitation and have also helped prioritize corrections funding in financially strapped state budgets. Michigan currently pays for both incarceration and medical treatment for inmates - \$31,325 to house and monitor them and an additional \$5,000 to \$22,000 in medical costs. If treated outside of the prison system, medical costs are paid by the individual's private health insurance or Medicaid.

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