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Mental Health Courts Legislation Gets Funding in Governor's Budget

Governor makes big push for legislation that ensures appropriate treatment for mentally ill, saves corrections funding

LANSING-A proposal by State Sen. Liz Brater (D-Ann Arbor) and Senate Democrats to create Mental Health Courts got a major push forward today as Governor Jennifer M. Granholm included funding for Mental Health Courts in her presentation of the Fiscal Year 2009 Budget. Modeled after the successful Drug Courts system, Mental Health Courts would allow judges to direct people with mental illness charged with minor offenses to treatment rather than jail. As lawmakers strive to control Michigan's soaring corrections costs, this proposal will ensure the best use of limited resources and the most appropriate sentencing for offenders.

"The Governor is on target with her assessment of the issues we face in the corrections system. Far too many people who need mental health care-not jail-are serving time rather than getting treatment," Sen. Brater said. "Treating people with mental illness appropriately is both more humane and makes the most of our limited resources."

Jackson is working to become one of the state's pilot programs for mental health courts. Over the past year, Jackson area judges, law enforcement, mental health service providers, prosecutors, and other local leaders have worked with Senate Democratic Leader Mark Schauer (D-Jackson and Calhoun Counties) to make Jackson's new Mental Health Court a reality.

Schauer and Brater have worked closely with the State Budget Director and Governor to ensure funding for mental health courts as a logical, attainable reform that truly has the potential to improve the quality of Michigan's criminal justice system, and save money for Michigan taxpayers.

"The status quo for Michigan's corrections system is not working and this breakthrough pilot program is a step towards improving it," said Schauer. "These programs have had strong success around the country and there's no reason we can't take advantage of them right here in our own backyard."

The vast majority of people with mental illness who are arrested are charged with minor, nonviolent offenses. However, many of them do not have access to appropriate care. 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.

Nationwide there are almost 300 mental health 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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