

WASHINGTON, DC – Congressman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott (D-VA), Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security, and Investigations, has introduced legislation with Congressman Richard Nugent (R-FL) that would help improve access to mental health services for people who come into contact with the criminal justice system. The bipartisan Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Act (JMHCA) of 2013 builds upon the successes of Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act (MIOTCRA) and supports law enforcement training, support for mental health and veterans treatment courts, resources for corrections systems and other collaborative approaches.

"Despite common misconceptions, the majority of mentally ill people who are arrested and incarcerated are low-level, nonviolent offenders," said Congressman Scott. "In 2004, the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act offered a new approach to this challenge by investing in state and local governments emphasizing effective, evidence-based approaches to improving interactions between people with mental illness and the criminal justice system. This reauthorization bill will provide grants to help correctional agencies learn how to identify and screen mentally ill prisoners so they can get help while incarcerated, and even help correctional services plan for reentry into the community. These programs will help jurisdictions to assist mentally ill persons and help keep them from unnecessarily going to jails and prisons."

The Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act was signed into law by President Bush in 2004. The funding helps states and counties design and implement collaborative efforts between criminal justice and mental health systems. It was reauthorized again in 2008 and expanded training for law enforcement to identify and respond appropriately to individuals with mental illnesses. It also supported the development of law enforcement receiving centers as alternatives to jail booking, where individuals in custody could be assessed for mental health and substance abuse treatment needs.

The new JHMCA legislation extends the program for an additional five years and also fills critical gaps, including providing additional resources for veterans treatment courts to help veterans suffering from behavioral or post-traumatic stress disorders; providing resources for transitional and reentry programs in correctional facilities; allocating resources for communities to better address "high utilizers" of public services; offering broader training during police academies and orientation; and promoting the use of evidence-based practices.

In addition to over 15 original cosponsors from both sides of the aisle, the legislation enjoys broad support from law enforcement, mental health professionals, judicial organizations, and veterans groups, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the National Association of Counties, the National Sheriffs Association, and the American Legion. It will be introduced in the Senate soon by a bi-partisan group of Senators led by Senator Franken (D-MN) and Senator Johanns (R-NE).

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