



**For Information Contact:**

Lydia Sermons-Ward, 703-907-8640

[press@psych.org](mailto:press@psych.org)

Rhondalee Dean-Royce, 703-907-7820

[rroyce@psych.org](mailto:rroyce@psych.org)

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## **Legislation Improves Mental Health Services for Mentally Ill Prisoners**

**Arlington, Va.** – The American Psychiatric Association (APA) applauds recent Congressional efforts to acknowledge and improve treatment for the large number of people with mental illnesses and substance use disorders who are currently incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons.

According to a 2006 report by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ), entitled "Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates," more than half of the population incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails – including 56 percent of state prisoners, 45 percent of federal prisoners and 64 percent of local jail inmates – were found to have a mental illness. Many of these inmates suffer from treatable disorders such as major depression, bipolar disorder and substance use disorder.

On November 13, the U.S. House of Representatives passed, by a vote of 347 to 62, the Second Chance Act, legislation sponsored by Congressman Danny Davis (D-III.). The legislation would provide transitional assistance to ex-offenders in an effort to reduce recidivism. Additionally, the legislation would extend and provide a full continuum of care for treatment of substance use disorders. The legislation also seeks to improve mental health screening and treatment and provides grants for family treatment programs. In August, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee approved similar legislation, sponsored by Senator Joseph Biden, Jr. (D-Del.).

The Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Reauthorization and Improvement Act (H.R. 3992 and S. 2304) aims to improve services for mentally ill prisoners by reauthorizing and boosting funding for a grant program that provides treatment for inmates and training for law enforcement officers who treat them. The House bill is sponsored by Representative Robert Scott (D-Va.) and the Senate bill is sponsored by Senators Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Pete Domenici (R-N.M.). On November 7, the House Judiciary Committee passed H.R. 3992, which will now head to the full House for a vote. On November 5, the Senate introduced S. 2304.

In response to the legislative actions, the APA issued the following statement:

“It is a national tragedy that jails and prisons have become the primary mental health care facilities in the United States today.

“People with mental illness, left untreated, can develop symptoms and behaviors that lead to their arrest and incarceration. Mental health and substance use disorder treatment in appropriate settings is often the answer, and adequate funding for such treatment is urgently needed.

“Ending the ‘criminalization of the mentally ill’ and the inappropriate incarceration of persons with mental illness could prevent unnecessary building of correctional facilities and make room for violent and repeat offenders.

“Providing more adequate funding and cooperative programs between mental health care professionals and correctional agencies is a step in the right direction. Providing these cooperative resources could, in the end, help improve overall public safety.”

“We applaud the bi-partisan action taken by both the House and Senate. If enacted, the legislation would represent significant steps forward in improving access to mental health

services and substance abuse treatment programs in the United States for those incarcerated within the prison system.”

**About the American Psychiatric Association:**

The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society whose more than 38,000 physician members specialize in diagnosis, treatment, prevention and research of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. Visit the APA at [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org) and [www.HealthyMinds.org](http://www.HealthyMinds.org).

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