

Statement of Thomas C. Phillis for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Courts, Hearing on Senate Bill 1128, April 18, 2008 at Beaver County Courthouse.

My name is Thomas C. Phillis, I am employed in the Beaver County Public Defender's Office, my position is that of Deputy Chief Public Defender, I would like to begin by thanking the committee for inviting a Public Defender to testify in regard to the Criminal Justice and Mental Health Reinvestment Bill. Too often Public Defenders feel left out when it come to funding and input to new programs, so we appreciate being asked for input at this early stage.

How to deal with those individuals who are affected by mental illness and become involved in the Criminal Justice system has been an ongoing problem. Here in Beaver County we have seen an upswing in the number of persons with Mental Health conditions who become involved with the criminal system; additionally, and of more concern to me, there is an increase in repeat offenders with mental health conditions as major components to their criminal activity. Locally this increase seems to coincide with the slow down at Mayview State Hospital and the decision of another local mental health facility to not take new patients. It has become increasingly difficult to obtain an early Mental

Health Evaluation for clients in all but the most serious cases.

It is important that persons with Mental Health components to their cases be identified early, as proper evaluation and treatment can both prevent their being repeat offenders and guide their instant cases to treatment resources, thus relieving some of the burden on more traditional incarceration and supervision resources.

Because the Public Defender's staff has early contact with individuals as they proceed through the system, they are in a good position to identify potential mental health concerns. (I would note here that in about 60% of the counties in the Commonwealth the Public Defenders are the attorneys appointed to represent persons in involuntary commitment proceedings so there is some familiarity with Mental Health Problems) A standardized method of evaluating and identifying these persons is needed. The Criminal Justice and Mental Health Reinvestment Act would provide monies to local programs designed to identify and seek treatment for individuals who have become involved with the Criminal Justice System in part or in whole because of a Mental Illness. The earlier such persons can be identified

and treated, the less of a burden they are to the Criminal Justice System. The programs this bill could fund would mean less incarceration and supervision resources would need to be used to process the matters created by mental health problems. If these programs can steer individuals affected with mental illness away from criminal activity it is a benefit not only to them but to the Criminal System as well, in that it lessens the use costly portions of the system such as incarceration and can prevent the need to deal with additional cases of repeat offenders.

Again I would like to thank the Committee for its time and to summarize by stating that the programs that this bill could provide for would be of great benefit to the Criminal Justice System and more importantly of great benefit to those citizens of the Commonwealth who have Mental Health issues and who would receive the care and treatment they need.