

March 17, 2004

The Honorable Ted Strickland  
336 Cannon House Office Building  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Strickland:

On behalf of the American Bar Association, I am writing to thank you for introducing legislation which will help address one of the most serious challenges facing the American criminal justice system today—the large number of people suffering from a mental illness who are being housed in our prisons and jails nationwide. Your bill, H.R. 2387, would provide needed incentives to states and local communities to offer treatment, job placement, housing and education to non-violent mentally ill offenders.

The criminal justice and juvenile justice systems are being asked to bear responsibility for the current crisis in mental health care. State appropriations for mental health services are far lower today than they were in 1955, the peak population year for state mental institutions. A recent study of the Council of State Governments found that “people with mental illness are falling through the cracks of this country’s social safety net and are landing in the criminal justice system at an alarming rate.” Another study by Human Rights Watch found that as many as one in five of the more than 2 million Americans in jail and prison are seriously mentally ill, outnumbering the number of mentally ill in mental institutions.

H.R. 2387 is an important first step towards encouraging collaboration among social services and the criminal and juvenile justice systems to help develop and improve meaningful, effective community-based mental health treatment alternatives to incarceration. This, in turn, will break the cycle of repeated contacts by mentally ill people with the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

We applaud your continuing leadership on this critical issue facing our justice system. We support H.R. 2387 and look forward to working with you to ensure its swift passage by the House.

Sincerely,

Robert D. Evans

cc: Members, House Committee on the Judiciary