

A bridge for law enforcement  
and community collaboration

**Testimony before the Judiciary Committee  
March 12, 2008  
Support for SB 639**

Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor, and members of the Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to speak before you today. I am Louise Pyers, President of the Connecticut Alliance to Benefit Law Enforcement (CABLE) and Criminal Justice Project Director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness of CT (NAMI-CT). CABLE is a non-profit research and education collaborative made up of police, mental health professionals, persons with mental illness and their family members who are dedicated to the safety and well being of persons in law enforcement and the communities they serve. CABLE is the state's sole source trainer for Law Enforcement Crisis Intervention Teams. Along with our partners at NAMI, we also provide training on mental illness to probation and parole officers.

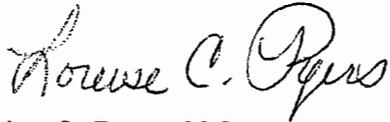
Both organizations support SB 639, An Act Concerning Services Provided by the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to Arrested Persons, because the additions to the DMHAS Jail Diversion program make sense. This bill will add assessments for those accused of felonies, which will close the gap for some who may still be eligible for jail diversion. It will also require communication with family members or representatives who never know what is happening regarding a loved one's case unless they have a private lawyer.

Many families have extreme difficulty in getting information from public defenders. That is a major complaint of some of the crisis calls that I take through the NAMI-CT warm line. Given that public defenders may carry heavy caseloads, it makes more sense for DMHAS to be the conduit of information to the client, family members or representative. Some people with serious mental illness who are arraigned do not have a clue about what is happening or what is expected of them because their cognitive abilities and memory may be impaired due to an acute phase of their mental illness. If released to the community, that person may not remember when his or her next court date is. Sometimes family members are there to help, sometimes they are not. It is in those cases that the DMHAS jail diversion staff may be able to help by giving the family the current status of the case, the next court date or the public defender's name and contact information. Without that information, many families are helpless to know what to do or how to help and many see their loved ones incarcerated without any contact or information from the court. They do not know where to turn. It is not expected that the Jail Diversion Clinician would interpret the law or give legal advice. All families want is information that can help them help their loved one.

The bill also asks for additional appropriations to the jail diversion, for which NAMI-CT and CABLE are in full support. Connecticut's jail diversion program for persons with mental illness is successful, but it is unable to serve many individuals identified as appropriate for their program due to the lack of housing options and community services. As a result, they are incarcerated at a high cost to taxpayers and the person. We urge for the additional funds to be directed toward community programs and housing options that will enable more individuals to utilize this option.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Respectfully submitted by:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Louise C. Pyers". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Louise C. Pyers, M.S.

President,

CT Alliance to Benefit Law Enforcement, Inc.

and

Criminal Justice Project Director,

National Alliance on Mental Illness of Connecticut