

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/the-justice-and-mental-health-collaboration-act-moving-through-the-senate>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last month, the Senate Judiciary Committee approved the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Act (JMHCA) of 2013, a critical piece of legislation that will reauthorize and improve the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act (MIOTCRA) of 2004. Despite the fact that in the United States people in the criminal justice system have significantly higher rates of psychological and physical health problems than the general population, the efforts by mental health and criminal justice agencies to identify and treat people with mental health issues have often lacked sufficient coordination.

JMHCA builds upon the strong foundation established by MIOTCRA of encouraging collaboration between mental health agencies and the criminal justice system in order to increase public safety and public health. In addition, JMHCA supports the development of mental health services for veterans, mental health treatment courts, specialized training for law enforcement, and a variety of other efforts intended to improve both the quality of and access to mental health services available to individuals in the criminal justice system.

The need to increase collaboration between criminal justice and mental health agencies in order to ensure that mentally ill individuals receive better treatment is an issue that has strong bi-partisan support. Sen. Al Franken (D-MN) and Rep. Richard Nugent (R-FL) introduced the bill, which also has 57 cosponsors from both sides of the aisle. The bill will head to the full Senate for a vote, and hopefully the House version of the bill, H.R. 401, will come before the Judiciary Committee in the House of Representatives in the coming weeks.

The Vera Institute of Justice has long been committed to supporting increased coordination in order to more effectively address the mental health needs of underserved communities. [Closing the Gap](#), a study in Washington, DC that was published last year by Veras Substance Use and Mental Health Program, highlights the importance and relevance of legislation like JMHCA. According to this report, criminal justice agencies in Washington, DC often failed to identify the mental health needs of arrestees. Challenges to identifying and serving arrestees with mental illness were compounded by systemic barriers to collaboration between criminal justice agencies and the Department of Mental Health. This lack of coordination negatively impacts many individuals lives, increases government spending, and decreases public safety.

To address these issues, Veras SubstanceUse and Mental Health Program has recently launched a website called [Justice and Health Connect](#) aimed at closing the communication gap between mental health agencies and the criminal justice system, an invaluable resource that will complement legislation such as JMHCA.

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