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President and CEO

Ambassador (ret.) Barry B. White
Chairperson of MAMH Board of Directors

July 27, 2021

The Honorable Patricia Jehlen
Chair, Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development
24 Beacon Street, Room 424
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Josh Cutler
Chair, Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development
24 Beacon Street, Room 167
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Testimony in support of H.2008/S.1815, *An Act to reinvest justice and opportunity in communities affected by incarceration*

Dear Chair Jehlen, Chair Cutler, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development:

On behalf of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health (MAMH), thank you for strong and steadfast leadership in advancing the health of people with behavioral health conditions and their families across the Commonwealth. We are writing to respectfully submit this testimony in support of H.2008/S.1815, *An Act to reinvest justice and opportunity in communities affected by incarceration*, filed by Representative Keefe and Senator Chang-Diaz.

Formed over a century ago, MAMH is dedicated to promoting mental health and well being, while preventing behavioral health conditions and associated disability. We are committed to advancing prevention, early intervention, effective treatment, and research for people of all ages. We seek to eliminate stigma and discrimination and advance full inclusion in all aspects of community life. This includes discrimination affecting not only people with behavioral health conditions, but also people who face unequal burdens and barriers to the protections and benefits of citizenship due to their race, ethnicity, gender identity, or disability status. MAMH has a demonstrated track record of furthering its mission by convening stakeholders across the behavioral health and public health communities; disseminating emerging knowledge; and providing subject matter expertise to inform public policy, service delivery, and payment methodologies.

H.2008/S.1815, *An Act to reinvest justice and opportunity in communities affected by incarceration*, or the Justice Reinvestment Act (JRA), would ensure the savings from lower incarceration rates are reinvested in communities impacted most by the criminal legal system. It creates a Strong Communities and Workforce Development Fund. Dollars from the fund will be competitively granted for the purpose of developing and strengthening communities heavily impacted by crime and the criminal justice system by creating opportunities for job training, job creation, and job placement for those who face high barriers to employment. The fund seeks to help youth and emerging adults (under age 25), victims of violence, people without a high school diploma (if over age 18), and people who face other significant barriers to employment.

Grant recipients must leverage evidence-based models of creating employment opportunities or building job skills, such as transitional employment programs; social enterprise; pre-apprenticeship or other training programs; school- or community-based high school dropout prevention and re-engagement programs; cooperative and small business development programs; and community-based workforce development programs. The goal is to generate economic opportunity, lower recidivism rates, and end cycles of incarceration.

MAMH strongly supports this bill because people with behavioral health conditions are unfortunately overrepresented in every aspect of the criminal legal system due to a behavioral health system that has failed to meet their needs and has deferred to police and judicial intervention rather than assertive engagement, crisis management, and recovery oriented treatment in the health care system. In the absence of assertive services, people with mental health and substance use conditions have higher rates of arrest (Steadman et al., 2009). They experience slower and biased booking processes (Finkle et al., 2009) and are more likely to be held on bail and have longer sentences. In jails, the prevalence of severe and disabling mental health conditions is 14.5% among males and 31% among females compared to 5% and 4% in non-jailed populations (Steadman et al., 2009). Tragically, they have high rates of suicide in jails and prisons, in part due to disproportionate risk of placement in segregation (Hayes, Hunter, Moore, and Thigpen, 1995). They are not likely to get necessary treatment and services both while they are incarcerated and upon release. Likewise, they are more likely to have their community term revoked or suspended when they are on parole or probation (Skeem, Nicholson, Kregg, 2008) because without assertive treatment and recovery support services, they experience high rates of recidivism with the criminal legal system than others who have been arrested or jailed.

We also know that job training, job creation, and job placement – the purposes of the Strong Communities and Workforce Development Fund – can be critical components to helping individuals with behavioral health conditions achieve recovery. When the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) launched the Adult Community Clinical Services (ACCS) program to serve its adult clients, they initiated a very intentional partnership with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) to provide vocational rehabilitation to support individuals in securing, maintaining, or advancing in competitive employment (Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, 2018). The Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) also describes that employment not only provides income, but can provide a sense of purpose and accomplishment, as well as feelings of membership in the community and social inclusion. H.2008/S.1815 will help promote individual wellness, support people in achieving recovery, and ultimately reduce criminal justice system involvement.

Please do not hesitate to be in contact should you have questions, would like additional information, or if MAMH can serve as a resource to your critical work at dannamauch@mamh.org and jessicalarochelle@mamh.org. I urge you to report H.2008/S.1815, *An Act to reinvest justice and opportunity in communities affected by incarceration*, favorably out of Committee. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Danna Mauch, PhD
President and CEO



Jessica Larochelle, MPH
Director for Public Policy and Government Relations