

Memo

From: Anita Roessmann, Staff Attorney, Disability Rights Montana

Re: Legislative Alert Update for April 23, 2009

Date: April 23, 2009

Hello everyone,

The purpose of this email is first, to give you some good news, and second, to ask that you call, write, fax or email Governor Schweitzer, asking him to support you, your family and your community by signing the three “crisis bills” when they reach his desk in the next day or so.

But if you don't want to read another long email about the crisis services bills, stop reading right now, dial 406-444-3111, and leave a message for Governor Schweitzer asking him to sign House Bills 130, 131 and 132. Then if you have a few more minutes, pass along this email or call other advocates and ask them to do the same.

And now, as Paul Harvey used to say, here is the rest of the story. The three community crisis services bills have been passed by the Legislature. On Monday, HB 130, 131 and 132 were approved almost unanimously by the Senate (there was one “no” vote). Today, the House gave its final approval by wide margins. The final votes in the House were 79 to 19 on HB 130; 74 to 26 on HB 131; and 79 to 20 on HB 132. Please take a moment to celebrate, pat yourself on the back and tell yourself, we've come a long way.

Any day now, Senate President Bob Story will sign the three bills and transmit them to Governor Schweitzer. At that point, our ten days of waiting will begin.

After the bills are transmitted, the Governor has ten days to either sign the bills as written, amend them (this is called an “amendatory veto”), or veto them. If the Governor does not take any action during the ten days after transmittal, the bills simply become law.

As events unfold, future Updates will explain more about our options under these different scenarios. ***For now, our job is very simple and urgent: It is time to contact the Governor.***

The Governor's office has testified against the mental health crisis bills. Though the administration has criticized the bills for being less-than-perfect, the primary criticism has been that there is no money to fund community crisis services during this biennium.

What these bills do is require counties or groups of counties to develop community crisis services plans, which may then qualify for state funding. The funding must be used to pay for services that divert people in crisis away from jail, prison and the State hospital and keep them in the community. Among the services that can be funded are emergency detention beds and short-

term treatment beds (also called diversion beds.) At this time, people with mental illness who don't have insurance that covers in-patient psychiatric care are sent to the State Hospital for emergency and short-term services that could be more appropriately and effectively provided in the community. The shortage of local beds means large numbers of people don't get the services they need, when they need them, and many end up in jail. The Community Crisis Center in Billings is another kind of crisis service that keeps people safe in their communities and that could be funded through these bills.

Most lawmakers think that these bills are important enough to fund. The House Appropriations Committee appropriated \$4 million to fund them. The Senate Finance Committee stripped out most of that money, but when the full Senate heard the budget bill, Senators voted to take money from other budget items to fund the crisis bills.

Now the two budget bills, HB 645 and HB 2, are in conference committees, where the House and the Senate are going to iron out their budget differences. The funding for the crisis bills is going to change yet again. It seems likely that the conference committees will strip out the Senate funding (it was kind of stolen, after all). However, finding a way to fund the crisis bills is a priority for most of the lawmakers on the conference committees. At this point, advocates can only watch and wait and pray. We will have our answer in the next two or three days.

Meanwhile, we need to urge the Governor to support these bills that our legislators wrote, debated, considered and then passed by overwhelming margins. We need to tell the Governor, ***"We have waited long enough. For fifteen years, we have been told that it is not the right time to fund community crisis services. Please help us make history now."***

At the bottom of this email, I have attached some "talking points" that may help you write an email or letter. However, a very effective way of convey your message to Governor Schweitzer is to simply pick up the phone. The Governor's office will take your message and record your "vote." All you need to tell the Governor's office is: ***Please sign HB 130, 131 and 132, the community crisis services bills.***

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY:

- ***CALL THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE:*** 406-444-3111
- Send an email to the Governor by using the on-line contact form:
<http://governor.mt.gov/contact/commentsform.asp>
- Mail a letter:

Governor Brian D. Schweitzer

Office of the Governor
Montana State Capitol Bldg.
P.O. Box 200801
Helena MT 59620-0801

- Fax a letter: 406-444-5529
- Pass along this message to other advocates and supporters of community crisis services.

Some ideas for a letter to Governor Schweitzer:

- ✓ Speak from your own experience. Explain why funding community beds for people in crisis is so important to you, your family and your community.
- ✓ Governor Schweitzer has greatly expanded community services for people convicted of crimes. He has emphasized treatment over incarceration, and rehabilitation over punishment, and reduced the state prison population. Ask him to help us transform community services in the same way by helping us serve people in crisis in the community.
- ✓ Remind Governor Schweitzer that community crisis services will keep people out of jail and prison and make our communities safer.
- ✓ Explain that community crisis services save lives. Ask the Governor to help us reduce our state's suicide rate, which is the highest in the country, by creating accessible community crisis services.
- ✓ Tell the Governor about the broad support these bills have in your community.
- ✓ Tell the Governor that communities are looking forward to a partnership with his administration that will transform community mental health services until a real continuum of care that values lives and community safety.

Please call me on my cell phone if you have any questions, 406-461-5350, or write to me at anita@disabilityrightsmt.org .

Thank you for all you do for people with disabilities.

Anita

Anita Roessmann
Staff Attorney
Disability Rights Montana
1022 Chestnut
Helena, Montana 59601
800-245-4743
406-449-2344
406-449-2418 fax
anita@disabilityrightsmt.org