



Comments on Senate Bill 739
From Chris Bouneff, Executive Director, NAMI Oregon
April 6, 2015
Senate Committee on Human Services and Early Childhood

NAMI Oregon wishes to express its support for Senate Bill 739, which would provide greater access to therapeutic services for individuals living with serious mental illness confined in Oregon's state prison system.

As described in other testimony, individuals with serious mental illness are regularly held in solitary confinement in the Behavioral Health Unit (BHU) at the Oregon State Penitentiary. Those confined to the BHU generally lack access to therapeutic activities and environments. While not necessarily held there as punishment, such housing is essentially the same as punishment.

Evidence today is more than sufficient to demonstrate that for people with serious mental illness, solitary confinement is akin to torture and worsens symptoms, in particular "anxiety, depression, anger, cognitive disturbances, perceptual distortions, obsessive thoughts, and psychosis¹." In short, for those with serious mental illness, solitary confinement is like pouring gasoline on a fire.

NAMI strongly supports SB 739's provisions that provide greater opportunities for individuals confined at the BHU the type of therapeutic activities that will help them reach and maintain a level of stability that increases the odds that their incarceration doesn't lead to more complex psychiatric symptoms. Without a meaningful standard of care, the Department of Corrections is actually increasing the odds that people will deteriorate.

NAMI also supports provisions in SB 739 that better regulate the use of force for inmates living with serious mental illness. The type of command and control techniques that are common in law enforcement and in correctional environments are ineffective with individuals who are experiencing symptoms of their psychiatric illness. Rather, de-escalation is most effective. SB 739 sets parameters around how force is utilized so that any incident is resolved successfully and safely for both prison staff and inmates living with serious mental illness.

With meaningful treatment and access to more therapeutic services and environments, prisoners living with serious mental illness can continue their journey to recovery and be better prepared for success when they reenter their communities. If simply left to solitary confinement, odds are that their conditions will worsen. And upon reentry, they will be more likely to be a greater burden to Oregon's mental health system and other community systems.

NAMI Oregon recommends the committee support SB 739. Thank you for this opportunity to provide our input.

¹ Jeffrey L. Metzner and Jamie Fellner (2010). "Solitary Confinement and Mental Illness in the U.S. Prisons: A Challenge for Medical Ethics." *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*. 38:104-8