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Testimony by Sid Gelb, Public Policy Chair of NAMI MASS, before the Judiciary Committee April 10, 2007 in support of House Bill 1314: An Act Providing for Behavioral Science Representation on the Parole Board Sponsored by Chairwoman Balser.

Good afternoon Chairman O'Flaherty, Chairman Creedon: and members of the Judiciary Committee. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to testify this afternoon.

My name is Sidney Gelb, I am public policy chair of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Massachusetts. NAMI-MASS is a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of people who have biologically based brain disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression and other persistent serious mental illnesses. Consisting of over 2500 members in 25 statewide affiliates , we advocate for improved services, access to medication, housing and employment to help our family members recover from their mentally ill. We provide self-help support through our affiliates and educate ourselves and the public at large about mental illness to eliminate the stigma and discrimination against people with mental illness that pervades our society.

NAMI Mass supports House Bill 1314 An Act Providing for Behavioral Science Representation on the Parole Board sponsored by Chairwoman Balser. This bill requires that no fewer than three members of the Parole Board be selected who have qualifications in psychiatry, psychology, sociology or social work. The bill makes no change to current statute, other than specifying that a minimum of three members are to be drawn from the behavioral sciences.

This bill would put into effect recommendations made by the Boston Bar Association Task Force on Parole and Community Reintegration dated August 2002. The report states that since 1991 the large majority of persons appointed to the Massachusetts Parole Board have been from backgrounds in policing, prosecution and probation. Since 2000, the Parole Board has been composed entirely of persons with such criminal justice backgrounds. At present, the Parole Board is composed of three former state prosecutors,a former state troopers, a former probation officer and a former detective. Unfortunately the one position that was vacant since March 2001 was filled once again by a person with a background as a probation officer. No person of color serves on the board. There are no Hispanic members. This is contrary to the spirit of the law which includes among the training and experience recommended, psychiatry, psychology, sociology and social work. Although the board has received training about the nature of mental illness by the Department of Mental Health some time ago, there are still members on the Board who have not received that training. Having a diverse board is important to provide the difficult decision that the Board must make with different and professional experience, and view points so that a range of perspective are present in reviewing a case.

According to the Department of Correction statistics 22% of the total DOC population are receiving mental health services. These are only the most seriously mentally ill people. Virtually no mentally ill inmates have received paroles in resent years. It is important that mentally ill inmates be paroled so that they can receive the support the parole officer can provide to help reduce the recidivism which often occurs to those inmates released after serving their complete sentence. The insight brought by people with training in behavioral sciences would be invaluable in making decisions about the paroling mentally ill and all other inmates.

We urge you to report favorably on this bill.

Thank you for your attention.

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