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August 13, 2008

Ms. Tara Larsen
Assistant Director for Policy
DMA
1985 Umstead Drive
2501 MSC
Raleigh, NC 27699-2501

Dear Tara,

I am writing on behalf of the National Alliance on Mental Illness North Carolina to thank you for helping to move our state forward regarding suspending benefits rather than terminating benefits for populations in both prison and in our state institutions. It felt wonderful to hear your presentation on this topic to the Legislative Oversight Committee some months ago because previously there had always been an unwillingness to move forward on this important issue. We all speculate that jail and prisons have probably been seeing more than their usual share of individuals with mental illness and other disabilities due to the unanticipated problems of reform. With unexpected failure of private non profits in the changing rate environment, it is hard to stabilize your life – and where you get your care. Without that stability and access to medications, I believe the results have been higher admissions to institutions and even to jails and prisons. Due to the churning of so much change, it really makes sense to make this change now.

It is good to know that there is no requirement for a statutory change and that this change can be done strictly through policy. And it is heartening to know that things like Ticket to Work can be done even without completion of the MMIS system. Our hope is that we work together to eliminate any barriers to implementing this policy change.

Specifically, I would like to know the details of the plan for implementing this change. Do you have a date set? I would like to inform our membership, and of course I am anxious to continue to move forward.

Suspending benefits rather than terminating them is a huge step in the right direction. It is also an opportunity to broaden the ways we can work together on a variety of best practices for the prison population. You know that there is a subgroup of the Commission working on Prison Rules just now, with a plan to make their first report in October. I see many opportunities for further collaboration around prisons- for adequate screening upon entry to the correctional setting, for re-entry planning, including things like getting IDs, expediting applications, and coordinated release



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planning. I am going to attach for your information a wonderful article from the Bazelon Center on Best Practices in Access to Benefits for Prisoners with Mental Illness that outlines areas that we might jointly work to make improvements here in NC.

Thank you again Tara for your leadership in promoting suspension of benefits. I will look forward to hearing from you soon regarding the planned implementation date and process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Debra G. Dihoff".

Debra G. Dihoff, MA
Executive Director