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MHE open letter to the MEPs in support of the Written Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights in Closed Institutions

For the attention of the Members of the European Parliament

Dear Madam, dear Sir,

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is a European non-governmental organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, advocacy for social inclusion and the protection of human rights for (ex-) users of mental health services, their families and carers.

We are writing to you regarding the written declaration of the European Parliament on the protection of human rights in closed institutions¹. The provisions of this declaration are to focus on the human rights violations of people secluded in closed facilities. The declaration calls on the achievement of coordinated measures and legislation that better controls the human rights situation in closed institutions.

According to the text of the declaration, some key actions should be undertaken at EU level. The declaration calls on systematic inspection of closed institutions not only by official bodies but also by groups of citizens. These groups of citizens would come from the non-governmental sector and represent civil society. They should be entitled, by law, to carry out inspections and have the power to enter closed institutions freely. Their inspection should lead to reports on their findings being presented to the relevant authorities of Member States and the 'inspectors' should then help these authorities to propose reforms or urgent measures to fight human rights violations.

MHE and its member organisations welcome this declaration as an important step towards the recognition of the human rights of institutionalised people. Incarcerated People in closed institutions deserve human rights protection equivalent to all other citizens.

MHE is particularly concerned by the fact that every day, behind closed doors and beyond any control, people with mental health problems are deprived of even their basic human rights as well as being denied their human dignity. Basic rights such as the right to vote, the right to security, to their integrity or the right to dignity, are often violated in mental health facilities. Some incarcerated people are secluded in isolation rooms for hours without being able to change their clothes. They are frequently subjected to treatment without their consent. In different countries, the number of detentions, entitled by law, increases and violence in wards is growing. Isolation, electroconvulsive therapy and forced medication are still common practices in many countries and represent severe violations of the rights of people who are experiencing them.

¹ Declaration made by MEPs Maria da Assunção Esteves, Jo Leinen, Héléne Flautre and Giusto Catania (see the official text in attachment)

In our European States, where human rights are considered as a fundamental principle and a key 'issue', institutions are still a place where people live and where their basic rights should not be denied.

MHE calls on your commitment and support to promote a coordinated EU policy for human rights in closed institutions to address these violations and to fight them. As a Member of the European Parliament representing citizens in the EU, you can make this first step a reality by undersigning the written declaration on the protection of human rights in closed institutions.

*Mental Health Europe
Brussels, 17 March 2009*