

Good morning/afternoon. My name is Margie Lemay and my family has lived in Colchester, Vermont for the past 30+ years. I am a member, volunteer, and employee of NAMI Vermont, the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Vermont, part of America's largest grassroots mental health organization

My family's story is one of failed systems, struggle, heartache, and profound love. Today, I am talking about our son, our family — but there are hundreds of others in Vermont who are in one stage or another of crisis — no action can help my son now, but we can change their outcome.

Today I would like to share with you my 31-year-old son's journey on this earth. Last Monday, we lost him to a lifetime of struggle with mental health and addiction. Everyone who loves him is both devastated by this loss and comforted to know that his struggle and pain in this life is now over.

I am here to tell you that, at every turn in his and our journey, every social system designed to help us, failed us. The mental health care system, the physical health care system, the education system, law enforcement and court systems, and our social service systems — every one of them underfunded, under-staffed, overwhelmed and stretched beyond their limits were never able to function smoothly in a coordinated, efficient way to pool resources and offer our family the RIGHT care, at the RIGHT time, and in the RIGHT place. The result is that the baby boy we welcomed into our life on October 11, 1991, with incredible joy and hope is no longer with us.

The NAMI Smarts Training Program that I co-teach with Laurie Emerson, NAMI Vermont's Executive Director, teaches people how to write an effective, concise story, deliver it to legislators, and most importantly, make an "ASK." I have given a lot of thought to what my "ASK" is today....

The systems designed to *fix* the problems are *causing* them.

My "ASK" is for everyone listening right now — whether you identify as a peer, a family or community member, a provider, or a legislator — please feel and adopt my urgency and help me fix what's broken.

We need to start over and design a system where we communicate, coordinate, and make efficient use of our extremely limited resources. Our systems MUST be generously staffed with people who are paid well and who have a workload that allows them to focus on providing whole-person care from start to finish — supporting and guiding them until they are well into recovery.

As a society, we MUST step up, stop talking, and start doing.

- How is it possible that my son could drive to City Hall Park and within minutes be approached by a half dozen dealers all vying to sell him Fentanyl? Because the police are so disrespected and reviled that no one wants the job and far too many positions remain unfilled.
- How is it possible that my son could be transported by ambulance after a near fatal overdose last fall and is released within the hour with no one having encouraged or offered a rehab placement or follow-up care? Because he was physically stable, there is no placement to offer, and there are two dozen people in the ER waiting to be seen.
- How is it possible that the only way we as parents could get him into a residential placement as a young teenager was to give up our parental rights and allow him to be placed in a foster home until a placement became available? Because the only placement in Vermont was funded by the state of Vermont and reserved exclusively for teenagers in the custody of the Department of Social Services. It's important to note that we had private insurance at the time that would have paid 100% of the cost.

My husband and I have just begun to learn how to exist in this world without our brilliant, funny, compassionate, loving baby boy, because despite investing every ounce of courage and resolve we had, all of our resources, and the love and support of family and friends, the systems designed to help us failed us every step of the way. I implore you to help me fix this now, before we lose one more person we love. Again, today I am talking about our son and our family — hundreds of our neighbors, friends, and loved ones are in the same cycle of crisis right now — help me change their outcome. I don't want to hear one more person say, "I'm so sorry for your loss." I want to hear them say, "I hear you; I see you; I feel your pain... How can I help you fix what's broken?"