

Laurie Emerson, Executive Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Vermont
September 8, 2020

Madam Chair Copeland Hanzas and Members of the House Government Operations Committee

Thank you for allowing NAMI Vermont to provide comment on Bill S.124.

NAMI Vermont is the independent Vermont chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. We are a statewide, non-profit, 501c3, grassroots, volunteer organization comprised of people who live with a mental health condition, family members, and advocates. As our mission, NAMI Vermont supports, educates and advocates so that all communities, families, and individuals affected by mental illness or mental health challenges can build better lives.

Bill S.124 is of great importance to NAMI Vermont and our community of individuals and families living with a mental health condition. Many families and friends do not want to call the police when a mental health crisis occurs. Just the presence of law enforcement can escalate a situation – resulting in our loved ones being charged with a criminal offense – or worse the use of deadly force – when all that was needed was to keep our loved one safe due to suicidal ideation and attempts. We need to look at alternative systems to prevent crises. However, if there is an encounter, law enforcement needs the right training to know how to respond to de-escalate a situation.

NAMI Vermont’s comments focus mainly on the Vermont Criminal Justice Training Council section of the bill.

1. Council Membership:

- a. In establishing the Council Membership as well as the Law Enforcement Advisory Board, there aren’t any advocacy organizations named to appoint community members who’ve been directly impacted by police interactions such as NAMI Vermont, Vermont Psychiatric Survivors and Green Mountain Self Advocates. Having this representation on the Council and Advisory Board involves community input into the process. Secondly, the Council representation is heavily weighted with law enforcement and does not have an equal balance of community representation. The community should have an equal voice at the table in the decision-making process.

2. Training:

- a. We support the Council offering courses throughout the state and not requiring overnight courses – which could attract a diversity of recruits to pursue a law enforcement career.
- b. We support more consistent and required training that focuses on trauma informed education, de-escalation, decision-making, conflict resolution, using proper tactics, scenario role-playing – such as Team Two training.
- c. Trainings should be continuously reviewed and improved. Involve a diverse representation of stakeholders to review trainings – such as a Civilian Oversight Committee.
- d. Ensure that there are trainings by external individuals/professionals with lived experience such as: mental health conditions, developmental disabilities, autism, Alzheimer’s, brain injuries, to name just a few.

- i. NAMI Vermont trainings build empathy and reduce stigma through our lived experience with "NAMI In Our Own Voice" presentations for all new recruits, police departments, sheriff departments, and state police. Trainings also need to include lived experience stories from family members who have been involved with law enforcement interactions with their loved ones. NAMI Vermont has worked with the Vermont Police Academy and Team Two to provide speakers as part of the training and want to continue to be a consistent resource.
 - ii. Additionally, one of NAMI's Signature Programs, Family-to-Family is an 8-week evidence-based program that helps family members better communicate and support their loved ones through this intensive training program. Families are better able to support their recovery process because of this training. Law enforcement need similar trainings.
 - e. **ALL** police (and correctional officers) should be trained to handle mental health crises or heightened states of emotional dysregulation. With only 8 hours of mental health training at the academy plus one refresher training as required by Act 80 – it is not enough.
 - f. NAMI Vermont would recommend offering training to correctional officers as part of the criminal justice system. It has come to our immediate attention by inmates and family members that correctional officers need additional training to know how to interact with people who have a mental health condition or who may be experiencing a heighten state of emotional dysregulation.
3. Policies & Processes
- a. We support establishing a process to review previous officer performance when applying for positions at other law enforcement agencies – allowing for more transparency and accountability with officer misconduct incidents.
 - b. We encourage exploring the use of civilian oversight of law enforcement incidents and policies. The community wants to be involved with decisions about who is protecting their safety. Embedding community members into law enforcement committee work, will build relationships and trust - where all voices can be heard and included as a collaborative approach.
4. It is important that law enforcement have access to their own mental health support system and promoted internally – such as anonymous support groups or mentors facilitated by other law enforcement personnel.
5. Building collaborative community partnerships and intensive training will help improve responses and resources for individuals and families that may have a mental health crisis. We encourage law enforcement to work closely with NAMI Vermont and other advocacy organizations within each community.

Thank you for listening to our comments.

Respectfully Submitted,



Laurie Emerson, Executive Director
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