

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

Chair Lippert and Members of the House Health Care Committee

Thank you for allowing NAMI Vermont to provide comment on the DPS Proposal that will provide funding to the Dept. of Safety to contract with the Designated Agencies for mental health clinicians to work closely with law enforcement at the State Police Barracks.

We appreciate the proposal that will help provide resources to law enforcement. This initiative is well-intentioned to improve outcomes for people who may be experiencing a crisis and in need of emergency assistance. This collaboration raises the question as to the source of the funding. Since this is a state initiative to support mental health, why wouldn't the funding be provided to the Dept. of Mental Health to supplement the Designated Agencies budget?

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 traumatized, 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 create alternative approaches to respond to crises. We need to decriminalize our response to mental health crises.

So why do families, friends, or neighbors call police? Because they respond immediately when there is an emergency. However, it has been my personal experience and many other families experience to not call the police due to previous interactions. If families could call the Designated Agency's crisis line and have someone respond immediately, families would not have to resort to calling the police or bringing their loved one to the emergency room. However, Designated Agencies are understaffed and underfunded. At times, it takes too long for crisis teams to respond – because of workforce shortages. I also want to recommend that crisis teams should include people with lived experience. We need an integrated approach to these very difficult situations – and best practice has shown that an integrated approach works.

Families call NAMI Vermont when they are in crisis. They want to help their family member get the support they need before a crisis escalates. We refer families and individuals to call the Vermont Support Line, the Text Line (741741), call their local Designated Crisis Line, join a NAMI Vermont Support Group – both for families and individuals who need support for their mental health. Peer support works!!! It is complementary to clinical interventions. The community needs options – what works for one person – doesn't necessarily work for someone else. Peer Support organizations like NAMI Vermont are part of the solution. Many of our facilitators take calls all hours of the day to help support people who attend their support groups when they are in a crisis and don't know what to do. Learning from other people who've been there can help resolve a very difficult crisis.

It takes a village - with all of us working together to provide many alternatives and funding those alternatives. The new federal legislation to create a Suicide Prevention Lifeline and mental health crisis 3-digit number is a step in the right direction. Calls can be fielded to the right resources with the right response.

Additionally, we need to invest in better recruitment and training of all officers. Building collaborative community partnerships and intensive training will help improve responses and resources for individuals and families that may have a mental health crisis.

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.

One of NAMI's Signature Programs, Family-to-Family is an 8-week evidence-based intensive training program that helps family members better communicate and support their loved one's recovery process. Law enforcement need similar trainings to know how to respond with empathy and compassion.

Thank you for listening to our comments.

Respectfully Submitted,



Laurie Emerson, Executive Director
NAMI Vermont

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.