

Laurie Emerson, Executive Director
NAMI Vermont
January 30, 2019
Committee: House Health Care
Re: Mental Health Advocacy Day Testimony

Chair Lippert, Vice Chair Donahue and Committee Members: Thank you for inviting NAMI Vermont to testify to your committee.

- **Who I Am:** My name is Laurie Emerson. I am the Executive Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Vermont (NAMI Vermont).
- **Who We Are:** NAMI Vermont is the independent Vermont chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, a statewide non-profit, grassroots, volunteer organization
- **Who We Serve:** Our community includes: family members, peers/individuals affected by a mental health condition, and professionals who work with them.
- **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.
- **Core Competency:** Lived experience as family members (caregivers and peers/individuals with a mental health condition)
- **Statistics:**
 - 1 in 5 people experience a mental illness in any given year
 - 1 in 25 adults lives with serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression or bipolar disorder.
- Today is Mental Health Advocacy Day.
- 47 co-sponsoring organizations and their networks are here today.
- We are calling on legislators to “Shift the Balance” by investing in community-based programs to build capacity.
- We need to create more hospital diversion options such as a crisis respite and peer support that work in collaboration with clinicians as we seek a goal of an integrated and holistic health care system. Having more drop-in outpatient services can help individuals maintain their wellness in the community and get help when it is needed most – NOW – not later when it reaches a crisis level. By focusing on preventive approaches, we could alleviate the need for inpatient care.
- Community-based programs have not been fully supported. It is imperative that staff such as case managers for Designated Agencies are paid a competitive wage so that they can attract and retain experienced staff.
- We need to expand more supported community residential options to divert individuals from in-patient hospitalization. A supportive environment helps to improve overall wellness by receiving continuous care in a less restrictive environment.

- As we look to determine the number of inpatient beds that Vermont needs, we should also be taking an inventory of the community-based services, identifying the gaps, and making strategic plans to invest in an integrated system of care.
- Act 200, Section 3 of the 2018 legislative session required an Order of Non-Hospitalization Study Committee where NAMI Vermont appointed a family member. NAMI Vermont supports the recommendation in the Orders of Non-Hospitalization report that Vermont begin a pilot project for enhanced voluntary mental health community services in two communities in Vermont, as an alternative to civil (non-forensic) Orders of Non-Hospitalization and to reduce the need for Level 1 (acute crisis) hospital beds. By providing enhanced services, individuals will be better supported in the community reducing the need for inpatient hospitalization.
- NAMI Vermont's programs are free. We provide education classes for families, peers, and professionals. We are beginning a new program called "Ending the Silence" to educate students, parents, and faculty. We also provide support groups. Since 2012, we have established support groups within psychiatric in-patient hospitals. We also provide a 100-page Resource Guidebook that was developed by NAMI volunteers and we host an annual conference in May. All of our free programs are administered by our trained volunteers.
- We advocate for families and individuals through statewide advisory meetings and provide education and lived experience testimony to legislators. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you would like to hear from our network about their experiences.
- Thank you for listening to our comments. We appreciate your leadership and support as you make decisions to improve the mental health system of care.