

Laurie Emerson, Executive Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Vermont
April 7, 2022

Chair Lippert and House Health Care Committee Members,

Thank you for allowing NAMI Vermont to provide comment on Bill S.195, An act relating to the certification of mental health peer support specialists.

NAMI Vermont supports establishing a certification program for mental health peer support specialists. The State of Vermont is far behind the nation with establishing a peer support certification program. We appreciate the inclusiveness to also establish a pathway for a Family Peer Support Certification sub-specialty. Our comments will reflect this component of the bill.

Family Peer Support Specialists positively impact families through support and education. Family Peer Support Specialists draw on their own experience as a parent or primary caregiver of either an adult or child with emotional or mental health needs. They work to empower families by teaching skills that assist them in finding their own voice and to advocate. They have current knowledge of the mental health system and most importantly, recognize the life experience of raising a child with a mental health diagnosis or supporting an adult family member with mental health needs.

There are three organizations that are grounded in family peer support, education and advocacy: NAMI Vermont, Vermont Family Network and the Vermont Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. The Vermont Federation of Families has access to a credentialing program that has already been established at the national level. Additionally, NAMI Vermont provides family education and support to family members using a nationally recognized evidence-based curriculum known as NAMI Family-to-Family. We have delivered this program for over 30 years to thousands of Vermonters seeking knowledge and information about mental health to build their skill level with communicating, listening, navigating a crisis, and using self-care strategies, to name just a few of the workshops offered in this 8-week program. Our volunteer teachers are trained and certified to deliver this program in Vermont and NAMI Vermont is funded through grants and donations. With or without a credentialing program, we will continue to offer this valuable curriculum. Our teachers and facilitators are not paid. We run on a shoestring budget – however the system of care is changing. There is a great need for a workforce to support the mental system of care – A workforce with peers who understand – who have been there.

Family Peer Support Specialists provide a variety of services to families. These include sharing expertise by providing information, teaching coping skills, providing emotional support and helping parents become advocates. Family Peer Support Specialists may help families navigate and understand mental health systems and educational systems. They may accompany parents to meetings to ensure the parents' voices are heard. They are able to assist families by modeling good communication skills and sharing their own experiences. We need family and peer support specialists working within law enforcement, hospitals, schools, justice diversion programs, corrections, to name just a few of the possibilities.

The core competencies listed in the legislation (on page 3) have commonalities regardless of sub-specialty such as Code of Ethics, lived experience, cultural competence, etc., however a Family Peer Certification would include additional training for core competencies based on the role that will be fulfilled by the specialist. The trainings required should be identified and developed by the peer experts in that field – such as the family organizations or the peer organizations. There are unique trainings for Family Peer Support that could include: Caregiver Support Services

Promoting Resiliency and Recovery; Child and youth development; Child welfare issues; Family dynamics; Introduction to special needs diagnoses; Juvenile justice issues; Local, state, and national mental health systems and resources; Mentoring leadership in others; Social and Emotional Skills; Special education law and rights; Substance use among children, adolescents, and young adults; Use of family-driven approach to emotional health. The expectation is not to have the certifying body identify or develop the specific competencies related to that sub-specialty, however the certifying Board should approve and validate that these trainings as submitted by the organization who have been completed by the individual being certified. Our recommendation is that the certifying body be a diverse group of peers from both the Peer and Family organizations.

On page 4, section 2(b)(2) The certifying entity needs more than “feedback and recommendations” from the three statewide family organizations – especially if a pathway for Family Peer Support Specialists will be created.

In regards to the testimony and discussion about oversight, each organization who employs the peer support specialists should have oversight over their employees and if a grievance is brought against a certified peer specialist, policies would be in place to handle the situation. There are many policies and procedures that will need to be worked out to establish this program and **funding is critical**.

Thank you for listening to our comments and the committee’s commitment to establish a pathway for Mental Health Peer Certification programs in Vermont for both peers and families.

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.