

Laurie Emerson, Executive Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Vermont
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Madam Chair Lyons and Senate Health & Welfare 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. We would also like to provide comment on Bill S.197: An act relating to the Coordinated Mental Health Crisis Response Working Group

NAMI Vermont supports establishing a certification program for mental health peer support specialists. We appreciate the committee's dedication and commitment to peer support in this time of widening workforce and service gaps and increasing mental health crises, especially for children and young adults. The State of Vermont is far behind the nation with establishing this program. There are references in the bill regarding family members being able to be certified, however it was not clear that this bill was to also establish a Family-to-Family Peer Support Specialist certification program until it was clarified in testimony by Wilda on January 26th. We appreciate the inclusiveness to also set up a Family or Parent Certification pathway.

Family-to-Family Peer Support Specialists or Parent-to-Parent Peer Support Specialists have the opportunity to positively impact families through support and education. Family or Parent 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.

Family or Parent 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 or Parent 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.

There are three organizations that are grounded in family peer support, education and advocacy: NAMI Vermont, Vermont Family Network and the Vermont Federation for Children's Mental Health. The legislation as written focuses on Mental Health Peer Support Specialists and does not consider the differences with requirements, competencies, and trainings for a Family-to-Family or Parent-to-Parent Peer Support Specialist. All three are unique in their own respect - and that the certifying entity needs more than "feedback and recommendations" from us as Vermont's statewide family education, support and advocacy organizations.

Quote from Legislation: "In developing a statewide certification program for peer support specialists pursuant to this subsection, the peer-run entity under contract with the Agency shall seek feedback and recommendations from mental health peer-run and family organizations, hospitals, and mental health and substance use disorder treatment providers and organizations by convening not fewer than four stakeholder meetings."

NAMI Vermont is in support of Bill S.197: An act relating to the Coordinated Mental Health Crisis Response Working Group. We appreciate the opportunity to be named in the legislation to be part of the working group. The NAMI Vermont Advocacy Committee has been working on a project for family members to collect information from the

Designated Agencies about their crisis intervention process. The objective is to share information with families to educate them about the options to help support their family member instead of calling 911 or waiting until the crisis is so acute that they bring their family member to the emergency room. We need to intervene earlier.

I have been on the DMH Coalition for establishing the 9-8-8 three-digit Suicide Prevention Lifeline at the state level. NAMI national had advocated at the federal level when this legislation was passed nationally. They are now providing guidance and support to the states for our advocacy efforts. That guidance is to REIMAGINE Crisis intervention. It should no longer be that we call 9-1-1 or that we take someone to the Emergency Department. This needs to originate in the community. This approach has three pillars

Someone to Call - Call Center Hubs – These is where crisis calls will originate with 9-8-8. Sometimes the caller just needs someone to talk to, but if not – then what do we do?

Someone to Respond - Mobile Crisis Teams – to meet people where they are at to help de-escalate the situation and provide resources to individuals and families. But, what if more is needed?

Somewhere to Go - Crisis Stabilization – establish more options for short-term stabilization for children and adults – such as the Psychiatric Urgent Care for Kids (PUCK) program in Bennington where UCS is working with schools. We are lacking an adult 24-hour crisis stabilization center in communities throughout Vermont. Some Designated Agencies have crisis beds, but it is not a drop-in center for crisis stabilization. Having more peer-operated respite center is another option.

If someone needs in-patient hospitalization, what is the continuum of care? Families are saying that people are being sent home directly after hospitalization without a step-down option to ensure they are able to care for themselves. We hear from families and individuals that they need more support.

Of course, all of these options are not possible until the workforce issue is addressed.

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.

References:

<https://iowapeersupporttraining.org/family-peer-support-specialists/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjiAaHp8xE0&t=4s>