

Laurie Emerson, Executive Director  
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Vermont  
January 31, 2024  
Testimony for House Health Care  
Mental Health Advocacy Day

Madam Chair Houghton and House Health Care Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting our group to share information with you on behalf of the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Mental Health Advocacy Day. We appreciate the support of Representative Cina and the members of House Health Care Committee to recognize Mental Health Advocacy Day through a Resolution that will be read today in the House Chamber. Mental Health Advocacy Day focuses on the theme “Welcoming and Caring Communities – Belonging for All”. This theme was prominent throughout the day with highlights on how to create belonging and welcoming communities. During our webinar on Monday, we had over 347 registered for the event with 294 unique attendees.

At NAMI Vermont, our mission focuses on three pillars: Support, Education, and Advocacy. We increased our impact in FY2023 to serve 4,410 individuals. Our advocacy platform focuses on preventive approaches that help individuals, families, and communities maintain their mental wellness. The pandemic shined a light on our mental health and created loneliness and isolation. We are now turning the corner to create social connections and meaningful relationships which are critical for our well-being. Everyone needs meaning and purpose in their lives. NAMI Vermont provides those opportunities by training our dedicated volunteers who administer all of our FREE Signature Programs that are developed on a national level through NAMI.

Through training new volunteers, we have started new in-person NAMI Connection Support Groups in Barre and Rutland – as well as a new virtual support group for individuals with a mental health condition. The Burlington Connection Support Group has been going strong since 2009 with the same facilitator for the past 15 years. We are getting requests to have our support groups back at the psychiatric inpatient facilities where patients begin the healing process through peer support. Additionally, we have family support groups that are led by family members. This peer-to-peer model helps people to feel that they are not alone. There is no judgement, only acceptance with others who understand.

We are reaching youth and young adults to open the dialogue about mental health, suicide prevention, and how to help a friend through the NAMI Ending the Silence for students. We share our firsthand experiences through our stories that is interwoven throughout all that we do.

NAMI Vermont has served on the statewide 988 advisory committee meetings in Vermont, and we continue to keep advocating to let families know about this resource. We need to reimagine crisis intervention so that we respond to a mental health crisis with mental health support. This approach allows us to intervene early so people get the right help at the right time that does not involve law enforcement or hospital emergency rooms. This approach has three areas of focus:

1. Someone to call – 988 – this is a 24/7 model
2. Someone to respond – mobile crisis teams – need to expand to a 24/7 model
3. Somewhere to go – Diversion from the Hospital Emergency Departments – Urgent Care Models for both adults and youth - more Respite and Crisis Beds – a place where there is no wrong door.

This model also requires peer support as an essential component of the workforce that NAMI Vermont supports. I feel encouraged that we are moving in the right direction, but we still have a long way to go.

We ask that you continue to increase support for mental health and create a system of care that is healing and promotes resiliency. 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.*