

Laurie Emerson, Executive Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Vermont
May 1, 2026
Committee: Senate Health & Welfare

Madam Chair and Senate Health & Welfare Members,

Thank you for taking the testimony on Bill H.817 – Mental Health Literacy and Peer Support Initiatives. NAMI Vermont supports this bill and has been working with a Youth Mental Health Advocacy Cohort this legislative session. We are pleased that two Winooski students will be testifying to your committee on May 1st in support of Bill H.817.

- **Who We Are:** NAMI Vermont is the independent state chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, a statewide non-profit, grassroots, volunteer organization.
- NAMI Vermont operates as a peer-to-peer mental health organization. Established in 1984 as a family peer group, it has evolved into an inclusive organization in which individuals with lived experience of mental illness serve in key leadership roles. Our Board of Directors, staff, and volunteers all include peers, and all of our free programs are facilitated by individuals who are trained to draw on their own lived experience.
- A key objective of our organization is to promote early access to help – which starts with youth. We do this through the primary pillars of our mission: support, education and advocacy.
- **We Serve** everyone since all of us have mental health.
- **Statistics:**
 - Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people ages 10-24.¹
 - 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24.²
 - More than 1 in 7 youth ages 6-17 have a mental health disorder.³
 - 6,000 Vermont adolescents (1 in 9) aged 12-17 have serious thoughts of suicide.⁴
- **NAMI Vermont provides the following Mental Health Literacy and training:**
 - NAMI Ending the Silence for Students; Parents; and Community Members
 - NAMI Smarts for Legislative Advocacy
 - NAMI In Our Own Voice to share their story/experiences to create a welcoming judgement-free culture
- **Peer-to-Peer Initiatives can include:**
 - Student-led Mental Health Clubs (NAMI On Campus, Hope Happens Here)
 - Purpose: To normalize conversations about mental health, foster a supportive community, and provide education on mental illness.
 - Structure: Student-led with 1–2 staff advisors, these clubs offer a space for advocacy rather than therapy or diagnosis.
 - Activities: Members lead campus events, engage in community outreach, and learn about mental health advocacy.

- Establishing a Youth Peer Support Group
- Establishing a Help Line with Near-Peer Experts
- Developing Youth Ambassadors for peer support

2024 NAMI Next Gen Community of Practice Report Features Four Recommendations From Youth and for Youth

- NAMI participates in research as part of its mission and regularly publishes what it learns. In 2024, NAMI’s youth advisory group, NAMI Next Gen, set out to understand what young people say they need most in mental health support. Through their Community of Practice discussions, they identified four recommendations to strengthen youth mental health. Each recommendation highlights an essential area for organizations and adults who want to better support young people.
 - **Culturally responsive approaches:** Mental health support works better when it reflects people’s cultures and experiences. Culturally responsive approaches can reduce stigma, build trust, and help people get support earlier.
 - **Youth leadership and peer support:** Adults care about youth mental health, but young people need to be part of the process. Supporting peer-led programs and giving youth a real voice in decisions leads to programs that work better for them.
 - **Mental health education:** Young people need basic tools to recognize mental health concerns and talk about their feelings. Teaching mental health in schools can help youth get support sooner.
 - **Advocating for policy and system changes:** When decisions are being made about mental health funding and programs, youth should be included. Giving young people a chance to advocate strengthens efforts to address the youth mental health crisis.

This report and research demonstrates that this bill aligns with these recommendations and NAMI Vermont can be a resource and partner to help achieve these goals through our programs and services. Thank you for listening to our testimony.

Respectfully,

Laurie Emerson, Executive Director
NAMI Vermont

References:

1. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people ages 10-34. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2023.
2. 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24. National Institute of Health. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15939837/>
3. More than 1 in 7 youth. NAMI. Infographics and Fact Sheets. https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/NAMI_YouAreNotAlone_2025.pdf
4. Mental Health in Vermont. NAMI. March 2025. <https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Vermont-GRPA-Data-Sheet-8.5-x-11-wide.pdf>.
5. By Youth, For Youth: Recommendations for the Youth Mental Health Crisis. NAMI. 2024. <https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/NAMI-Next-Gen-Community-of-Practice-Report.pdf>