

## Testimony in Support of Peer-to-Peer Programs and Staff Education (H.817)

Hello, My name is Marissa Sylvestre from Winooski, I'm a member of NAMI Vermont, part of America's largest grassroots mental health organization, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. As someone who lives with severe depression and anxiety, I'd like to share my story with you and ask for your support of peer to peer support in schools as well as staff education

Beginning in my 7th grade year I struggled extremely with severe depression , and there have been moments where I have experienced suicidal thoughts. I started doing really bad in school and I distanced myself from all of my friends and that left me very vulnerable.

My Physical Education teacher was like my best friend and she realized that I showed signs of depression. She encouraged me to go to my mom and tell her everything that's been going on. From there my P.E teacher helped my mom find connections through the school to get me help. Every couple of months I'd go see a doctor for a depression screening and I was introduced to a therapist through my school.

Today, I'm more at peace than I ever imagined I would've been. I've built back up my relationships with the people that I love and I have so much support surrounding me that I don't feel the need to go through my feelings alone. Now I'm focused on making sure other young people get the same help and care that I received when I needed it most.

Many young teens experience mental health challenges just like mine but not everyone is lucky enough to have a trusted adult that they feel they can turn towards. Many schools don't offer resources that help with mental illness and may even suggest that you look elsewhere. But every person deserves to get help when needed without trouble.

Staff Education and peer to peer support can make a difference for many young children and teenagers and help get them the right support and care that is needed for them. Students may feel more comfortable talking about their issues with other young people who are going through the same thing. It means that educators will know what to look for in their students and what to do to best help them, as well as students will have a safe space to talk about any feelings and strengthen connections that they may have.

Thank you for meeting with me and listening to my story. Can I count on you to support bill H.817, an act relating to mental health literacy and peer-to-peer support in schools, and help give young people the help they need?