

**Testimony of Valerie Lepoutre
Before the Appropriations Committee
February 21, 2020**

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) budget

**H.B. No. 5005 AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING
JUNE 30, 2021**

Good evening Senators Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Valerie Lepoutre and I am the Peer Recovery Program Manager for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental health conditions. NAMI Connecticut, and its local affiliates provide support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for individuals, families, and children impacted by mental health conditions.

In collaboration with the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, NAMI Connecticut has been able to develop the Young Adult Connection Community – a young adult peer-run initiative/support network dedicated to improving the quality of life of emerging adults. This robust mental health program supports an underserved population by promoting all pathways to recovery and managing mental wellness through thought-provoking activities, recovery skill building, goal planning, and supportive discussion, while also helping others develop stronger interpersonal skills and life skills, which is essential to recovery.

Moreover, with the support of federal and state funding, we have also embedded suicide gatekeeper training into our Young Adult Connection Facilitator course and have expanded our program by providing customized groups for special populations, such as suicide loss survivors, LGBTQ+ folk, etc.

With the rising demand for mental health services on Connecticut's college and university campuses, many students are struggling to find adequate supports on campus. We have been working with the Connecticut Healthy Campus Initiative to expand our college-based programs and resources available for young adults, such as the development of the Student Wellness Navigator, a successful piloted position that tackles mental health issues on campus by raising mental health awareness, educating the campus community, supporting students, and promoting services and supports. We continue to focus on meeting the needs of college students by also increasing the NAMI on Campus program, a student-led, student-run mental health awareness club.

We are currently working on establishing an evidence-based Caring Cards pilot project to support young adults ages 18-29 entering and exiting mental health treatment related to suicidal thoughts and attempts. This effort helps support evidence-based Continuity of Care and follow-up efforts to young adults at risk of suicide between levels of care by creating and distributing peer-developed Caring Cards during and after treatment as part of the DMHAS-funded Networks of Care for Suicide Prevention Initiative (NCSP).

With your help, my goal – as an emerging adult with lived experience and as a mental health professional – is to increase these cost-effective and life-saving peer services that benefit Connecticut's youth and emerging adults, so we will be able to continue offering hope to those affected by mental illness, addiction, and suicide.

I understand the state's continuing fiscal challenges and the difficult decisions facing legislators and I appreciate that the Governor has flat-funded and not significantly cut the DMHAS budget. At the same time, certain state services and supports must be prioritized because of the increasing needs for services and the greater health care and human costs resulting from short-term funding cuts. I am asking you to consider increasing the funding for DMHAS behavioral health services, for related housing supports, and for services for high-need individuals in the DHMAS' budget.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Valerie Lepoutre, RSS
NAMI Connecticut Peer Recovery Program Manager