



Testimony of NAMI Connecticut

By its Executive Director, Lisa B. Winjum, JD
Public Safety and Security Committee
February 11, 2021

Re: S.B. 781 An Act Requiring a Study of the Crisis Intervention Training Required by the State Police Academy and Police Office Standards and Training Council
H.B. 5586 An Act Requiring Expansion of the Crisis Initiative Pilot Program Throughout the State
S.B. 572, An Act Concerning Community Crisis Response Teams and Reentry Centers.

Good afternoon Senator Bradley, Representative Horn, and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee, as the Executive Director of the Connecticut State office of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI Connecticut), I am writing today about S.B. 781, H.B. 5586, and S.B. 572.

NAMI is the nation's largest mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all people affected by mental health conditions. On the state and national level diverting people with mental health issues from justice system involvement is a priority for NAMI. We advocate for policies to get people help, not handcuffs. Mental illness should not be treated as a crime.

In a mental health crisis, people with mental illnesses frequently encounter police rather than getting medical attention. As a result, people with mental illness are over-represented in the criminal justice system. Every community should have robust crisis services for people experiencing a psychiatric emergency to receive help and avoid justice system involvement.

NAMI Connecticut collaborates with the Connecticut Alliance to Benefit Law Enforcement (CABLE) on CIT training by providing individuals and family members trained to share their stories of lived experience with mental illness to a law enforcement audience. Their participation in CIT trainings provide an opportunity for officers to hear about someone who experienced being in crisis, and may have interacted with law enforcement as a result, but is now living well with mental illness. The powerful and unique stories shared by NAMI presenters help increase officers' understanding and empathy, improving crisis response in communities. These presentations are consistently popular with officers who attend CIT training and NAMI's goal is to ensure that every law enforcement officer has this opportunity.

I defer to my colleague Louise Pyers, Executive Director of CABLE to speak about the details of CIT training and the benefits of the CIT program with this committee. She is the state's leading expert in CIT, having led the program here since 2003.

NAMI's involvement in CIT training reaches back to the earliest days of CIT in Memphis Tennessee. Throughout the country and here in Connecticut we have been a partner as CIT has expanded in communities. The effort to improve crisis response has always been an important part of our mission and NAMI has always advocated for safer, more compassionate and focused ways to connect people to care.

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NAMI Connecticut supports mental health training for our first responders. Our members have led the way in this training with important and meaningful stories that increase understanding and have a direct impact on this goal.

Both S.B. 781 An Act Requiring a Study of the Crisis Intervention Training Required by the State Police Academy and Police Office Standards and Training Council and H.B. 5586 An Act Requiring Expansion of the Crisis Initiative Pilot Program Throughout the State address the need for a systemic approach to assisting people with behavioral health needs. Both bills also highlight the critical need for a robust and responsive mental health crisis system. The CIT model promotes a strong and effective partnership between law enforcement and the mental health provider community. CIT encourages the collaboration necessary to help people in behavioral health crises get connected to services safely and, most importantly, without involvement with the criminal justice system, which is always the preferred outcome—that people in a mental health crisis get help, not handcuffs. **We would like to see more funding to expand the Crisis Intervention Team training that brings these partners together.**

NAMI Connecticut supports SB 572, An Act Concerning Community Crisis Response Teams and Reentry Centers. This bill offers an alternative to a criminal justice response to people in crisis. The Community Crisis Response Team will limit contact with law enforcement by dispatching appropriately qualified professionals to respond to 9-1-1 and non-emergency calls for welfare checks, mental health crises, homelessness, and substance use disorders. SB 572 also provides an opportunity to address and fix the systemic issues that disproportionately affect communities of color.

The Community Crisis Response Team program will create a support system to deal with people who be provided with the opportunity to get connected to treatment, services and programs during their moments of crisis, not be incarcerated for it. This social service approach to law enforcement will reduce the incarceration rate and divert people from unnecessary visits to the emergency room, which can be further traumatizing to people experiencing a mental health crisis. Police have been tasked with responding to many social issues that they are not equipped for. As the nation and state call for social justice and reimagining policing, SB 572 seeks to enhance the first response and reduce repeat emergency calls, while getting people with mental health conditions the help that police officers don't always have the training, resources, or time to provide.

SB 572 is also the first step towards ensuring that men and women returning home from incarceration have the best chance possible to reintegrate into society. People returning home from incarceration are disproportionately affected by issues related to mental illness, housing, employment, substance use disorders, and chronic medical conditions. The Reentry Welcome Centers will ensure that people are connected to these services on the day of their release, rather than dropped off without any resources or assistance after their sentences are completed. The centers will provide continuing supports while people are reintegrating into the community.



SB 572 is a long-term investment that will save the state money in the long run because it will divert people from the criminal justice system and incarceration, as well as from emergency rooms and inpatient hospitalization.

Thank you for your time and attention.

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