



Re: House Bill 6439, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2021, and Making Appropriations Therefor

Testimony of NAMI Connecticut

By: Lisa B. Winjum, JD, Executive Director

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Lisa Winjum and I am the Executive Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Connecticut (NAMI CT). NAMI is the nation's largest mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI CT provides education programs and support groups for people with mental health conditions and their loved ones and advocates for policies to improve the lives of people affected by mental health issues.

I am here today to support ask for an increase in funding for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). DMHAS has been chronically underfunded. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the existing mental health crisis in Connecticut and across the country. People with mental health issues have shared with us that their conditions have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The need to respond to people experiencing mental health issues has never been greater. The stress, uncertainty, and isolation of the pandemic is taking a toll on all of our mental health and the media attention to the crisis is raising awareness about maintaining mental wellness, increasing the demand for the support groups and education programs NAMI CT and other nonprofits provide. A strong mental health system and available services and supports for everyone who needs them is critical to the state's response to the COVID-19 crisis and its recovery because the pandemic is likely to have long lasting mental health impact.

Since March 2020, NAMI CT has **responded to more than 925 calls and emails** from people looking for mental health resources and referrals for themselves or a loved one—nearly double the amount we handle in an average year. We are not alone in this surge in calls from people seeking help. Nearly half of 93 call centers in a recent survey reported an increase in call volume, and almost as many said their workforce was overwhelmed. ¹ Some of these are people who have recovered from COVID-19—twenty percent of people diagnosed with COVID develop mental illness within ninety days² But many of these callers are COVID-19-negative people experiencing mental health conditions for the first time because of the stress, anxiety, isolation, and economic insecurity accompanying the pandemic.

Mobile crisis serves our base, it is needed now more than ever before, and the extreme lack of funding has left huge gaps in coverage on nights and weekends statewide.³ Here in Connecticut, over fifty percent of those who have been killed by police since 2001 were

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2020/06/15/crisis-hotline-call-volume-spikes-straining-social-workers/5266072002/>

² Bargaining for the Common Good

³ Bargaining for the Common Good

experiencing a mental health crisis.⁴ At NAMI we believe in help, not handcuffs and reducing interactions between those with mental illness and the criminal justice system to reduce tragedy and injustice. We ask that more funding be appropriated for mobile crisis.

We also request in your budget considerations you appropriate more funding to community non-profits. Since 2007, community nonprofits have lost at least \$461 million in state funding. Their resources have not kept pace with inflation or adequately covered increased costs and demand for services.⁵ In addition to the valuable work of DMHAS, community non-profits are the backbone of mental health services for the most vulnerable people in the state.

Finally, we ask you to maintain funding for Housing/Homelessness services. During the pandemic, shelters have sacrificed considerable space to make room for adequate social distancing. Sourcing acceptable PPE has shelters competing with hospitals and other frontline workers for resources. Approximately 250,000 of those experiencing homelessness in this country have mental illnesses, so this initiative is of great importance to NAMI CT.⁶ In serving the homeless population, we are serving our mission.

We understand that there are limited resources available and legislators must make tough decisions in funding services, but in this pivotal moment can't afford to continue down the path of under resourcing and under-funding mental health services.

Thank you for your time and attention.

⁴ Bargaining for the Common Good

⁵ Non-Profit Alliance

⁶ <https://www.bbrfoundation.org/blog/homelessness-and-mental-illness-challenge-our-society>