

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Ohio
Ohio House State and Local Government Committee

Dustin McKee - Proponent Testimony HB 585

May 16, 2018

Chairwoman Anielski, Vice Chair Hambley, Ranking Member Holmes, and members of the State and Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of NAMI Ohio regarding HB 585.

My name is Dustin McKee and I am the Director of Policy for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Ohio. As many of you may know, NAMI Ohio is dedicated to improving the quality of life and ensure dignity and respect for persons with serious mental illness. We also offer education and support through our network of 40 local affiliates to family members and people impacted by serious mental illness. We also work with policy makers and the public to raise awareness, destroy stigma and enact policies that enhance the lives of people impacted by serious mental illness.

NAMI Ohio is a membership organization. Our members and board of trustees are solely comprised of people impacted by mental illness, either by being a family member of a loved one with mental illness, or by having lived experience with mental illness themselves. Mental illness doesn't care if you are conservative or a liberal, it doesn't care about your religion or ethnicity, and it certainly doesn't care about a person's position on gun rights. As a result, NAMI Ohio's membership and board of trustees have diverse opinions about the hot button political issues of the day, including guns. For this reason, NAMI Ohio has generally stayed out of the discussion about guns and gun rights.

Today however, we have decided to testify in support of this bill because it contains provisions that are directly related to addressing the epidemic of suicide in our state and nation. In 2015 alone, at least 1,604 Ohioans died by completing suicide. Many of these suicides were completed using firearms. Although in certain cases, people intent on ending their lives may not be deterred by anything or anyone, most can be prevented from taking their lives. One way to help prevent such tragic occurrences is by temporarily separating the suicidal person from the lethal means of their demise by carrying out an Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO).

The ERPO provisions in this bill would allow authorities, after providing significant due process protections, to temporarily take a gun away from a suicidal person. To the members of NAMI Ohio who talk to families living in the aftermath of their loved ones' suicides every day, this seems like an excellent idea, even to our members who are the most ardent supporters of the second amendment.

There are also provisions in this bill that would allow for an ERPO to separate a person who is a threat to others to be separated from their firearms. Despite the deep rooted stigma about mental illness in our society and despite the high profile media reports related to people with mental illness, this is a rare situation for those suffering from these brain diseases. In the vast majority of cases, people with mental illness are either victims of violent crime or turn their harmful impulses upon themselves in the form of attempted suicides.

However, regardless of the rare nature of such circumstances where a person with a mental illness does pose a threat to others, it makes perfect sense to keep firearms out of the hands of those who are seriously mentally ill and also a threat to others. This is partly because the bill provides individuals with significant due process protections in such a circumstance. This ensures that such an ERPO is only implemented when a petitioner convinces a judge that the person is a threat to others by clear and convincing evidence.

Although it is somewhat painful for NAMI Ohio to risk increasing the already terrible stigma about people with serious mental illness, we believe that this legislation has the potential to save lives. NAMI Ohio is supportive of this legislation and urges the committee and the Ohio House to pass it swiftly.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today on HB 585. I would be happy to answer any questions that you have at this time.