

Ohio Senate Health, Human Services & Medicaid Committee
SB 56 - Testimony
Terry Russell - NAMI Ohio
March 7, 2017

Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Beagle, Ranking Minority Member Tavares, and members of the Ohio Senate Health, Human Services & Medicaid Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of SB 56.

My name is Terry Russell and I am the Executive Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Ohio. NAMI Ohio works every day to ensure dignity and respect for persons with serious mental illness and to improve their quality of life. We offer support to people living with mental illness as well as their families and close friends. NAMI Ohio works collaboratively with our network of 40 local affiliates to educate and support people impacted by 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 affected by serious mental illness.

NAMI Ohio has daily contact with people impacted by mental illness. As a result, we know that medication is very often the most crucial element of treatment for mental illness. We also know that it takes patience and collaboration with physicians and other mental health professionals for people with mental illness to find the right medication for their conditions.

Mental health medications, and particularly antipsychotics, do not produce the same effect in everyone. Some people may respond better to one medication or dosage than another. Patients experience different reactions and side effects. Age, gender, race, body size, body chemistry, other physical illnesses and their treatments, diet, and habits such as smoking are some of the other factors that can influence a medication's effectiveness. Therefore, the greater the range of medications available, the greater the chance that doctors and patients will find the right medication the first time around.

Access to the most effective treatment allows people with mental illness to live more independent lives. It also helps people avoid the most destructive features and symptoms of their mental illness. NAMI Ohio strongly believes that the clinical judgments of treatment providers based on their consultation with their patients should be the guiding force behind which medications people living with a mental illness are able to access.

Barriers to accessing the most appropriate medications for mental illness can result in emergency department visits, hospitalizations, homelessness, incarceration, and even death by suicide. Provisions in this bill allowing for an exemption from step therapy protocols will also prevent individuals who are currently stable on a mental health medication to remain on the medication that is successful for them. It makes sense to exempt patients from step therapy even if their drug was prescribed when they were covered under the current or a previous health benefit plan.

NAMI Ohio has long opposed step therapy for mental health medications because we believe a doctor and patient, together, are in the best position to determine the most appropriate medication regimen. As a result, we support the provisions in the SB 56 that require step therapy protocols utilized by insurance payers to be based on sound clinical practice guidelines rather than simply cost considerations.

NAMI Ohio supports this common sense piece of legislation. We believe that it will improve access to effective medication for people with mental illness, and will enhance continuity of care between plans. People with mental illness already have a difficult enough time finding medications that work for them. Limiting patient access to medications that their doctors believe will be most effective adds unnecessary barriers to recovery from these devastating illnesses. Forcing patients with mental illness to fail on medications they have already failed simply because they have a different insurance plan causes needless chaos and suffering in their lives. Consequently, NAMI Ohio is supportive of SB 56 and urges the members of this committee and of the Ohio General Assembly to pass it without delay.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide written testimony in support of SB 56. If you have any questions about this testimony, please feel free to contact me via email at terry@namiohio.org , or by phone at (614)224-2700.