**Mara Sydnor**

Testimony – HB 166

**NAMI Ohio**

Ohio Senate Finance Committee

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Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Burke, Ranking Minority Member Sykes, and members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Mara Sydnor, and I am the mother of a daughter who is bright, kind, empathetic and has bipolar disorder; this is my story.

At the young age of 4, my daughter was diagnosed with this serious mental illness, so I quit my job to focus not only on getting her the right treatment and therapist, but also to be her advocate in school. I had to be the one to convince the schools that she needed and IEP (Individual Education Plan) and educate her teachers on how she learns best, what her triggers are and how to help her get through the day, so she can succeed behaviorally and academically. I didn’t have to hire an expensive advocate, because I have been entrenched in the intricacies of bipolar disorder most of her life. I know what she needs to be successful.

In the first grade, my daughter exhibited sadness, anger and aggression toward her classmates. As a result of her behavior, she was stigmatized and had only two friends who accepted her.

Although my daughter’s elementary school had fantastic and patient teachers, she was left to her own devices all day, everyday. For the first 10 years of her life I would receive phone calls from her elementary school, sometimes multiple times during the school day or minimally several times a week, asking me what they should do to help her calm down.

In the fourth grade, she was hospitalized for suicidal ideation. When she returned to school, for budgetary reasons, they did not have a mental health specialist on staff or a trained Intervention Specialist who would know what to do to help her transition back to school. She was left to her own devices to navigate through her day. She struggled and called me every day to help her, because she was anxious and felt all alone. Many days I had to pick her up, because she just couldn’t make it through the day.

Many of her teachers told me they were spending too much time helping my daughter regulate her emotions, which was taking time away from their other students. Sometimes my daughter would walk out of the classroom, and the teachers would have to leave their other students, so they could look for my daughter. The teachers told me they were overwhelmed and unprepared to work with her, though they were fantastic teachers and did the best they could with the lack of resources available to them. So my daughter spent a couple of hours a day in the principal’s office reading her favorite books. The silver lining is that she is very bright, and with the accommodations offered in her IEP, she was able to catch up and do well.

Not until the fifth grade she was assigned to an Intervention Specialist who admitted to me that she didn’t have any experience in that field. She wasn’t able to adequately provide a safe place for my daughter to go to to process what she was going through or help her re-group. So my daughter continued to use the office as a place to calm down and read. They didn’t have the funding to provide a specialist trained in working with children with mental health disabilities.

By pure luck a behavior learning center (BLC) came to my daughters school when she was in her last year in elementary school. It was run by two professionals trained in helping children with mood disorders or other mental health challenges. . Because of the BLC she had a place to go when she needed a break and or get help to work through her crises, Not many schools are fortunate enough to have a BLC. Without that support, my daughter wouldn’t have been ready for middle school.

Unfortunately she had to go to a different middle school than her friends, because her feeder school did not have a BLC; there wasn’t enough funding for all the middle schools to have one.

For a child who has trouble making friends due to her illness and immaturity, moving her to a different school was traumatic for her. She felt abandoned and was at risk of becoming depressed.

With the help of her therapist and psychiatrist, she was able to enter the new middle school, and with the help of their BLC, she excelled academically earning a 4.0 all quarters, learned more coping schools and made friends she could count on. She is ready for high school, and we are confident she will succeed academically and behaviorally.

Unfortunately many families cannot tell a story about how fortunate they have been within the school system, because of a lack of funding in their school district.

As you have heard, lack of funding in schools to support children with mental disabilities is a central theme in my story. Slogans like “Ending the Silence” “Ending the Stigma and “On My Sleeves” are just slogans if there isn’t funding available to put mental health specialists in the schools to help students manage their mental health challenges, to educate them on how to recognize mental illness in themselves and others, and to teach acceptance of those who struggle with a mental illness.

The second leading cause of death among children and young adults is suicide, and the rate has been rising. Our children who have a mental illness deserve to have the same opportunities as their peers who do not have a mental illness. They are creative, caring and loving people who deserve to be supported in a place where they spend most of their day. Parents of children with a mental illness deserve to have peace of mind knowing that their children are getting the help they need, to not only get through the day, but to also be successful in school and in all their endeavors today and in the future.

I implore each of you to do the right thing and provide the necessary funding to our schools, so our teachers can do their job, and our children can have the help they need to be the best they can be. Time is of the essence. We need funding now.

Thank you for listening to my story.