

House Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee

Testimony of Luke Russell, Deputy Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio
March 2, 2021

Chairman Roemer, Ranking Member West, and Members of the Committee, my name is Luke Russell, and I am the Deputy Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio, often referred to as NAMI Ohio.

We are proud that we are the largest mental health advocacy organization in the country representing over 500,000 Ohio citizens and their families whose lives have been invaded by mental illness. NAMI Ohio has 40 affiliates throughout Ohio, representing all 88 counties. Each of you have constituents with mental illness, and their families are desperately asking for your support.

Our job at NAMI is to educate anyone who will listen to us and advocate – which I'm doing today, on supporting and fixing a system that for years has allowed our family members to wander the countryside. One of our most important roles is to provide support to the thousands of citizens who need help from the mental health system (often not available). Many of you are new to the legislature, and I'm asking you today to prioritize mental health care that has been neglected for so long.

In 1988, this body passed the historic Mental Health Act. We closed six of our state psychiatric hospitals. We were promised a community support system for those who for years lived in our hospitals. After 32 years, this promise has not been kept. Many of these special citizens find themselves in prisons, jails, homeless, and in sub-standard housing. Ohioans with chronic and disabling serious mental illness are disproportionately found in inappropriate places in our communities.

The time has come to recognize that serious and persistent mental illness (SPMI) is often times disabling, and we need to address the quality of life for these individuals currently in the system. It has become the NORM to accept this inappropriate intervention for individuals with SPMI.

NAMI Ohio supports House Bill 110. The enhanced focus on adults with serious mental illness in the Governor's budget is the right approach for Ohio. The Governor and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services approach to a multi-system adult service system is in the right direction. The focus in this budget looks to strengthen cross-systems collaboration that better meets the needs of adults with serious mental illness who cycle through the behavioral health, physical health, human services, and criminal justice systems.

The Governor's Budget begins to address what is missing in Ohio's Mental Health System. That is personalized care, support, and/or treatment. Over 50,000 Ohioans with disabling mental illness end up in homeless shelters, jails, prisons and in and out of psychiatric hospitals – UNLIKE other disabled populations such as individuals with Developmental Disabilities (DD) or aging. NAMI Ohio believes Governor DeWine's budget begins to recognize that serious and persistent mental illness is often times disabling and we need to address quality of life for these individuals currently in the system.

CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION

A new focus on services for those with serious and persistent mental illness beyond the typical community mental health treatment model will save lives by increasing access to care. The Governor's focus on those in multi-systems, needs in housing, crisis and inpatient care, and the criminal justice system will directly improve the lives of those with serious and persistent mental illness. The current system relies on a Medical Model versus the Community Support Model, which focuses on person-centered care and the human needs of those we represent.

Those living with mental illness and their families are often so distressed that they are in need of access to basic human needs in addition to trying to locate and access appropriate care. Services implemented for individuals with developmental disabilities recognize and address the need for care that enhances life quality. The Governor's focus on adults in multiple systems begins to develop a similar model that recognizes and provides programming to those who are disabled by their mental illness.

IMPROVED QUALITY IN LICENSED RESIDENTIAL SETTINGS

Those with serious mental illness continue to face challenges in accessing quality residential services. NAMI Ohio has been a proponent of the full continuum of opportunities so those with mental illness do not end up in jails, homeless shelters or on the streets of our cities. NAMI Ohio works daily with the Class 2 and 3 residential group homes serving the individuals and their families that we represent. The Governor's budget begins to address this issue by giving a financial incentive for residential operators of group homes to improve the quality of life for those living in these homes.

CRISIS SERVICES AND INPATIENT CARE

Many of the individuals NAMI Ohio represents end up in inappropriate service settings due to the lack of crisis intervention services. In the long run, this cost is higher to local communities and Ohio, while delaying much needed services to someone in dire need. The Governor's budget has taken this issue to heart. The continued funding for Crisis Stabilization Centers, for crisis infrastructures, crisis flex funds, and the funding to build workforce capacity in support of OhioRise and Family First Prevention Services Act implementation will positively impact crisis services. Lastly, the Governor's investment in the regional State Psychiatric Hospitals allows for the

continued care of the most vulnerable people in the most appropriate setting. These services are a critical part of the crisis continuum of care and act as a safety net for those needing longer lengths of inpatient care.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

NAMI Ohio supports the Governor's focus on intervention in the criminal justice system to better serve the 20% of individuals living in our jail. The budget calls for the continuation of funding for the Specialized Dockets Subsidy Project, psychotropic drug reimbursement to County Jails Initiative, investment in forensic centers, and additional treatment dollars to be used in Ohio's correctional facilities.

MOVING FORWARD

The following NAMI Ohio ideas are aimed to improve services and supports to individuals with severe and persistent mental illness:

1. Recognize inadequacies of services and the desperate need to make changes similar to the development of OHIO RISE for children and youth in multi-systems of care due to a higher level of care needed.
2. Changes will enable us to focus on the most vulnerable population (individuals in jail/prisons, homeless shelters, inadequate housing/no housing, etc...) to increase their quality of life. A new system of care for this sub-group of those with severe and persistent mental illness (disabled) needs to be person-centered and provide each individual services based upon their needs, and not what the current system provides.
3. Priority Services in a Person-Centered Care Model (beyond the current community-based center treatment model):
 - Care Management and Coordination (Navigators) to ensure:
 - Detailed plans for daily living opportunities (out of reach for many living with serious mental illness)
 - Housing with Basic Supports (food, shelter, clothing)
 - Adequate Inpatient Psychiatric w/ services that guarantee appropriate discharge planning to settings such as:
 - Rehabilitation Centers (access across the state)
 - Group Homes (i.e. Adult Care Facilities with adequate funding and access to quality services) Supportive Housing & Independent Living
 - Day Services:

- Clubhouses
- Peer Recovery Centers Supportive Employment
- Access to Crisis Services:
 - Immediate access to services when someone is in crisis 24/7 emergency room coverage for mental illness
 - ACT Teams & Crisis Centers
 - Evidence-based practices to reduce suicides in Ohio

CONCLUSION

NAMI Ohio stands ready and willing to work with all key stakeholders to develop a support services model that meets the basic needs of individuals with serious and persistent mental illness and their families. Governor DeWine's Budget is a great first step in making sure adults with serious and persistent mental illness get the care they need. This budget will allow the caring individuals that provide services to better address the needs of those disabled by their mental illness and get them the services they need, and not just what is currently available. It is now time to tackle the issue by developing a program and funding plan that repairs the safety net for the most vulnerable in our society.

In closing, just before the COVID pandemic started, NAMI Ohio took three family members to the Governor's residence and they made presentations to his full Cabinet. A week before this meeting, a young lady in Upper Arlington who had suffered with untreated mental illness for years, shot and killed her father and wounded her mother. During the meeting with the Governor, the sister of the father who was killed told the Governor and his Cabinet of how the system had failed their family. After the three presentations, the Governor looked at this young lady and said, "We will fix this."

The Governor and the budget that he has presented to you is a giant first step in keeping his promise. The budget talks about the chronic population and their needs. It talks about housing and crisis. It talks about dealing with mental illness in the jails and ways to successfully re-integrate those with mental illness coming out of the prisons. Although this is a first step, it is a major support for change.

Thank you and I'll answer any questions you have.