

Senate Health Committee

Testimony of Luke Russell, Executive Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio
May 10, 2023

Chairwoman Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, and Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health Committee, my name is Luke Russell and I am the Executive Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio often referred to as NAMI Ohio.

NAMI Ohio is proud to be the largest mental health advocacy organization in the country representing over 500,000 Ohio citizens whose lives have been impacted by mental illness. NAMI Ohio has 39 affiliates throughout Ohio representing all 88 counties. Each of you have constituents with mental illness and families who are desperately asking for your support.

The Governor's as-introduced Budget was historic for individuals with mental illness and their families. NAMI Ohio fully endorsed the Governor's 2024/2025 mental health budget because it challenged the status quo. The commitment to key priorities reveals support never seen before and not being discussed at this level anywhere else in the Country. In the last budget, Governor DeWine and the General Assembly took a step forward in addressing the needs of those with serious and persistent mental illness. After years of neglect, the State of Ohio two years ago slowly began moving toward the long unfilled promise of building a community-based system to help Ohioans impacted by mental illness and their families. The State Budget for FY 2022/2023 introduced by Gov. Mike DeWine showed a strong commitment to supporting Ohioans impacted by mental illness and his Executive Budget proposed for 2024-2025 took another leap forward to meet a surging demand for services and support programs, especially for mental health group homes, which house some of the sickest of Ohio's mentally ill.

Those living with mental illness and their families rely on Ohio's mental health system to provide the care they need. NAMI Ohio at times is critical of the system of care, but we are never critical of the individuals working on behalf of those with serious mental illness. This includes our partner groups with me here today, mental health boards and providers, local law enforcement agencies and those in other systems serving our brothers, sisters, uncles, parents, children, in-laws, and neighbors. These servants are our heroes. However, make no mistake, families living with mental illness in their home provide 80% of all caregiving. They have not been served with the same urgency of those with other healthcare needs. The positive note it

is now widely accepted and acknowledged that the demand for treatment and support services is beyond our current capacity.

As the Governor has so clearly outlined, with the closing of six state psychiatric hospitals in the 80's the promise of a community support system for those who for years lived in our hospitals has not been kept. As many of you know and have heard from local Sheriffs and Mothers, we too often find those with serious mental illness in prisons, jails, homeless, and in sub-standard housing. The fact is Ohioans with chronic and disabling serious mental illness are disproportionately found in inappropriate places in our communities. To quote Governor DeWine, "the system isn't broke, it was just never built". This is bad for Ohio's families, schools, businesses and law enforcement communities. An Ohio responsive to the needs of all citizens is an Ohio attractive to new developers and investors.

Several years ago, NAMI Ohio began presenting recommendations to develop an individualized plan of care for every adult with serious mental illness and every child with serious emotional disturbance. The goal encompassed not simply addressing clinical issues and managing symptoms but enabling people to cope successfully with life's challenges and to promote community living and meaningful choice. This budget has a focus on services for those with serious and persistent mental illness beyond the typical community mental health treatment model which we believe will save lives by increasing access to much needed supporting services such as housing, day services, and care coordination.

Unfortunately, the amended version of the budget produced by the Ohio House REVERSES some of the important gains proposed by the Governor, making it more difficult to build the person-centered community mental health system that many Ohioans so desperately need. At this critical juncture, the status quo is a step backward. NAMI Ohio urgently ask members of the Ohio Senate to consider the mental health crisis severely impacting Ohio families, businesses, schools, and our law enforcement agencies. We are asking the Senate to support the Executive Budget as originally introduced by Gov. DeWine.

Here are key issues of concern in the amended House Budget that will negatively impact tens of thousands of Ohioans with mental illness:

- The housing shortage is at a crisis level and mental health group homes have not seen an increase in funding **for over seven years**. Restore the \$24 million to the Residential State Supplement in Governor DeWine's budget to avoid people waiting for long periods of time for housing. These individuals waiting often end up in emergency room, shelter, homeless, and in the criminal justice system or worse.

- Proposed changes in the House budget around prevention and wellness will result in less housing, prevention, and criminal justice services for individuals with mental illness throughout Ohio. Now is *not the time* to limit access to critical local services for individuals impacted by mental illness and substance use disorders. The Senate should return to the Governor's allocation of \$13.9 million. Likewise, criminal justice allocation of \$30 million per year needs restored so that more, not fewer tools, are provided to care for those that end up in the criminal justice system. (Likely, due to a system never built after the closing of State Psychiatric Hospitals).
- The Local Continuum of Care funding cuts will drastically limit money ADAMH Boards can allocate for critical local programs, such as suicide prevention, outpatient, and in-patient treatment, none of which are covered by Medicaid. Return to the Governor's budget allocation of \$106.2 million annually for the Continuum of Care, the largest state general revenue investment sent to local mental health services for critical and necessary crisis, treatment, and recovery support services for communities throughout Ohio.
- The state has made substantial progress in re-building the trained workforce for community behavioral health service to reduce wait times for patients and increase recruitment and retention of qualified workers. NAMI Ohio is asking for direct care service rates and investments to stabilize the behavioral health workforce in the House version to be adopted. We need parity in the system (the behavioral health workforce is already paid less than other comparable social service fields).
- The need for state hospital bed capacity has never been greater and the supply is insufficient. NAMI Ohio is asking for a restoration of the \$32 million to expand state hospital bed capacity. The addition of more beds in treatment facilities means less folks in our jails, streets, and homeless shelters.

NAMI Ohio wants to work with the General Assembly to address the crisis in mental health that did not start with the COVID19 epidemic but worsened because of it. Ohioans in need of mental health and recovery support should be treated with dignity, respect and have an opportunity to have a quality life. They had a renewed sense of hope with the mental health budget proposed by the Governor to make critical improvements to Ohio's mental health system. We cannot turn back now and leave our neighbors with mental illness in the shadows.

We must ensure crisis infrastructure includes long term residential options once someone is discharged from a crisis stabilization unit, inpatient hospital, jail, and/or prison. The time has come to prioritize the development of a defined and fully funded continuum of housing and

support services for people with Severe and Persistent Mental Illness (SPMI). A person-centered approach to mental health will need to address accountability within the system. Support services will need to be developed to reduce law enforcement intervention and revolving short-term stays in psychiatric hospitals. We must also increase options for navigation to support services for individuals discharged from a jail or hospital.

NAMI Ohio is committed to increasing access for young people to basic mental health treatment, prevention, and awareness. Mental health services delivered to young people in the schools must be achieved through the Student Wellness and Success Fund (50% of the funding for mental health services). Likewise, OhioRISE needs to be fully implemented for multisystem youth who need intensive services, as well as enhancing peer support services. We need to help families gain better access to care and support initiatives to strengthen the behavioral health workforce continuum (including Certified Youth Peer Support). The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry labels Ohio with a “severe shortage” of just 11 psychiatrists for every 100,000 Ohio children.

NAMI Ohio believes in collaboration among key stakeholders at every level is critical to ensure services are available and accessible to those most in need. Together, we can improve the lives of individuals and families living with mental illness and create a mental health system that is person-centered and focused on meeting the needs of individuals that for several decades have not been accepted like others with a disability due to their illness.

NAMI Ohio applauds the Governor and Ohio’s General Assembly for their ongoing work to improve our behavioral health system. While we have made great gains in services and supports for children served in multiple systems (OhioRise), and people struggling with addiction, NOW is the time to prioritize and fully support the basic needs for adults who struggle with severe and persistent mental illnesses (SPMI) such as Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder and Major Depression. NAMI Ohio is pleading with you to support the budget submitted by Governor DeWine for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services that prioritizes services and supports to those most in need.

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