

House Children and Human Services Committee

Testimony of Luke Russell, Executive Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio
February 26, 2025

Chairwoman White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett and members of the House Children and Human Services 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.

We are proud to be part of the largest mental health advocacy organization in the country. We represent over 500,000 Ohio citizens and their families in Ohio whose lives have been invaded by mental illness. NAMI Ohio has thirty-nine affiliates throughout Ohio, serving all 88 counties. These Affiliates offer over 1000s of education, support, and advocacy programs every year in Ohio (for free). Every day, somewhere in Ohio, NAMI is offering a support group, education program, or advocating for an individual and family in need. Each of you have constituents with mental illness and their families are desperately seeking your support.

Those living with mental illness and their families rely on Ohio's mental health system to provide the care they so desperately need. Although we are at times critical of the system, we are never critical of the individuals within the mental health system. They are our heroes. Our partnership with the Ohio Coalition for Healthy Communities, the statewide collaborative of behavioral health organizations, is vital to our efforts (and many are also testifying today).

Make no mistake, families living with mental illness provide 80% of all caregiving. These individuals and their families have not been served with the same urgency as those with other chronic health conditions. In 1988, this body passed the historic Mental Health Act. We closed six of our state psychiatric hospitals, and approximately 26,000 people were sent into our communities. We were promised a community support system for those who lived in our hospitals for years. After 37 years, the promises to these individuals and their families have not been kept. Many of these citizens find themselves in prisons, jails, homeless shelters, and in sub-standard housing. Ohioans with chronic and disabling serious mental illness are disproportionately found in inappropriate places in our communities. Many of you can probably name someone in your family or community that has experienced the revolving door of crisis and treatment.

NAMI Ohio applauds recent efforts to improve our behavioral care health system. This includes the recent work with children and families on Ohio Rise, work across our communities on

prevention and crisis services, expanding access to mental health telehealth care, and the statewide work on improving substance use disorder access and care. More Ohioans are now getting the mental health services and help they need. It is now time that we prioritize the development and funding of a comprehensive person-centered, client navigation system for people with Severe and Persistent Mental Illnesses (SPMI). We can all work together to improve experiences, outcomes, and lives for people with SPMI by doing these three things:

1. Identify people with SPMI and prioritize support services that improve their lives. We need to develop and implement a shared definition of SPMI, so that managed care plans, boards, and providers all can identify people with SPMI and implement needed care and improvement initiatives.
2. Ensure access to the full continuum of person-centered services for people with SPMI. We need to work together to determine the comprehensive services that should be available to people with SPMI, including responsive Person-Centered Care Coordination, critical social and relational care such as housing and supported employment, and needed crisis and acute care services.
3. Committing to accountability for availability of care and responsive person-centered care coordination. We need to identify who is responsible to people with SPMI and their families for ensuring access to needed services; and who is accountable for responsive care coordination for each Ohioan with a SPMI and their families.

As Ohioans, we have a shared responsibility to ensure the well-being and prosperity of our state, and the last several state budgets clearly demonstrate a steadfast commitment to better serving those with serious mental illness. NAMI Ohio believes we must continue to build upon the base the General Assembly and Governor have begun to create over the last several years.

The focus on mental health services and supports serves as a testament to this body's recognition of the vital role mental health plays in the overall health and success of our communities. Healthy Ohio works. By investing in mental health, Ohio is not only addressing immediate needs but also taking proactive steps to create a healthier, more resilient Ohio. A good plan includes continued commitment to housing, day services, support for crisis services such as 988 and mobile response, workforce programs, and collaborations between healthcare providers, law enforcement, and local communities to improve outcomes for those in need of mental health services.

NAMI Ohio supports a renewed focus on services for those with serious mental illness beyond the typical community mental health treatment model that includes much needed supports to allow individuals a real opportunity to live quality lives in their communities. This means a person-centered approach that focuses on those in multi-systems who need housing, crisis and inpatient care, and alternatives to the criminal justice system.

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. Governor DeWine's as introduced budget prioritizes mental health treatments and supports that reflects a critical step forward in strengthening Ohio's communities and ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to live healthy and fulfilling lives.

NAMI OHIO Supports

- Continued funding for mental health group homes under the Residential State Supplement.
- Ongoing support for mental health and recovery Peer Run Organizations and Clubhouses that provide meaningful day activities.
- Continued funding for the Enhancing Quality Grants to mental health group homes that ensure ongoing operations through minor repairs and operational needs.
- Funding for 988 crisis hotline and mobile response and stabilization services.
- Enhanced quality of care through the development of Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics.
- Efforts to strengthen the behavioral health workforce.
- Increased coordination of treatment and recovery supports within Ohio's communities to enable individuals with mental health issues to access services in the appropriate setting (not the criminal justice system).
- Continued investments in peer support programs and services.
- Investments in school-based services such as the Student Wellness and Success Funds.
- Protecting the allocation of Cannabis tax revenue to expand behavioral health services.

In closing and on behalf of NAMI Ohio, I commend the General Assembly and Governor DeWine for their continued commitment to addressing the mental health needs in the great State of Ohio.

I thank you for the opportunity to share with you today, and I will answer any questions you have at this time.