

Testimony – June 15, 2017
Dustin McKee – NAMI Ohio
H.B. 49
Senate Finance Committee

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Skindell and Members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Dustin McKee and I am the Director of Policy for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Ohio. NAMI Ohio is dedicated to improving the quality of life and ensure dignity and respect for persons with serious mental illness. We also offer support to family members and close friends with a loved one that has a serious mental illness. NAMI Ohio works collaboratively with its 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 impacted by serious mental illness.

Today I'm here to talk about the importance of housing for people with mental illness. The need in Ohio is so great that we hear about this every day on our help line from families and people with mental illness. This contact with families and people with mental illness keeps our focus simple. People with serious mental illness need – just like typical people – a roof over their head, food in the belly and somebody who knows their name.

Today I'm focusing on the roof over the head. We all know that housing is a foundational necessity for individuals with serious mental illness to remain in recovery in the community, and the lack of it leads to unnecessary and inappropriate outcomes such as incarceration, hospitalization and sometimes death. In order to help address the problem, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services administers the Residential State Supplement Program (RSS).

RSS provides financial help to adults who have significant disabilities that are most often associated with a severe mental illness. RSS is used to pay for a portion of qualifying individuals monthly rent expenses for housing accommodations, which often include supervision and personal care services for residents at certain RSS eligible community living arrangements. It is essentially a housing voucher for people with serious mental illness to get a chance to live in a small, supervised group setting.

Typically, you would not see a staff member of NAMI Ohio testifying before you, as NAMI Ohio usually tries to give you all a chance to hear from families and people impacted by serious mental illness. However, the mother that we had lined up to testify was not able at the last minute to testify before you today. Her name is Susan Geary.

Susan spoke in the Ohio House on behalf of so many other mothers that have watched their children disintegrate before their eyes due to the awful symptoms of mental illness.

Because you changed the Residential State Supplement program four years ago, her daughter's life has been changed forever. For the past 2 ½ years, her daughter has lived at "House by the Side of the Road" owned by Ms. Deb Hamner-Price in Cincinnati. Her daughter pays most of her SSI payment for the support this home provides. She could not live there unless the Residential State Supplement program helped pay the cost of care she receives in that home.

Prior to coming to Ms. Hamner-Price's residence, her daughter was homeless, running the streets, going on spending sprees and she didn't know if the next call she received would be to tell her that her daughter was dead.

Her daughter suffers from Bipolar Disorder and anxiety. Someone at the Talbert House recommended Tricia visit Ms. Deb's residence to see if this would be the right setting for Tricia. Ms. Deb and Tricia bonded almost instantly and that is the beginning of Tricia's memorable experience. Deb has rules that must be followed and regulations to comply with while providing a safe haven for her clients. Over the past 2 ½ years it has not always been an easy road for Tricia to go down. Tricia was getting medications from several different medical doctors and would doctor shop with multiple ailments (which is part of her BiPolar disease). She was getting her prescriptions from approximately six different Pharmacies. Ms. Deb has since gotten Tricia into the Greater Cincinnati Behavioral center as a client where everyone involved in Tricia's care are able to see her records which allows for medications not to be duplicated and/or have Tricia overmedicated. Ms. Deb allows her clients freedom but also requires them to follow her house rules. Tricia attends groups to help her with her impulsive behaviors, social skills and ability to be somewhat independent.

Tricia's story does not end here. it is an ongoing and lifelong process. However, without the opportunity to be a resident at "House by the Side of the Road" we truly believe Tricia would not be where she is today if here at all. God has blessed Tricia and her family by allowing Ms. Deb Hamner-Price to come into our lives.

A month ago, Sue became aware that there is now a waiting list for the Residential State Supplement program. Since you took action four years ago to increase funding for the Residential State Supplement program, 1,200 severely mentally disabled citizens are now off the streets (one being my daughter). More importantly, families do not have to worry about that dreadful call telling them their loved one has lost their life to this terrible illness.

For all of the mothers and fathers of loved ones who deal with this illness, as well as people suffering from these cruel brain diseases, Sue and NAMI Ohio urge you to reinsert the language in the House Budget appropriating \$1M for the RSS line to increase the housing slots for 400 people with serious mental illness over the biennium.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you have at this time.