

## House Behavioral Health and Recovery Supports Committee HB 523 – Proponent Testimony

Testimony of Terry Russell, Executive Director  
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio  
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Chairman Carruthers, Vice Chair Pavliga, and Members of the House Behavioral Health and Recovery Supports Committee, my name is Terry Russell and I am the Executive Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio, often referred to as NAMI Ohio. On behalf of NAMI Ohio, I want to thank Representative Swearingen for his efforts to bring forward changes to Ohio Revised Code 340 through House Bill 523.

Today is bittersweet because this may be the last time I testify here at the Statehouse. For fifty years, I have come to this place of history and testified before so many House and Senate Committees. As a 30-year-old, I would have dinner with Speaker Vernon Riffe at the old Neil House. Governor Jim Rhodes helped me get my first job at the Ohio Department of Mental Health.

We are proud that we are the largest mental health advocacy organization in the country representing over 500,000 Ohio citizens whose lives have been invaded by mental illness. This includes those living with mental illness and their families. NAMI Ohio has 41 affiliates throughout Ohio representing all 88 counties. Each of you have constituents with mental illness and their families are desperately asking for your support.

As I shared with this Committee at your inaugural meeting, 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 often critical of the system, we are never critical of the individuals within the mental health system. They 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 issues. Our job at NAMI is to educate anyone who will listen to us and advocate on fixing a system that for years has allowed our family members to wander the countryside.

House Bill 523 ensures that at all times, half of the ADAMH Boards are comprised of persons who are receiving or have received mental health services, persons who are receiving or have received addiction services and the parents or other relatives of those who are or have received services. NAMI would not support any change in the law that reduces the number of individuals and/or family members with lived experience appointed to a local county board.

As Representative Swearingen mentioned in his sponsor testimony, “a one size fits all approach has bogged down the effectiveness of some of the boards, and it is the patients who are at risk of suffering because of it.” NAMI Ohio could not agree more.

I want to thank Rep. Swearingen for putting the representation of individuals and their families back in to the bill. NAMI Ohio does support House Bill 523, however we think it can go much farther.

During the State of the State, Governor DeWine spent a considerable amount of time talking about the need to change the current mental health system. He stated, “**the system isn’t broken ... it was never developed in the first place.**” Everyone in this room knows when this body passed the Mental Health Act of 1988, closing most of our State hospitals, we let people wander the countryside. We should be ashamed that the criminal justice system has become the quasi-mental health system. Most recently, the Director of the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, Anita Chambers-Smith, told me she runs the largest mental health system in Ohio. The Governor went on to say, “**the promises of the Mental Health Act were not fulfilled.**”

Let me quote from Gov. DeWine’s speech regarding the failure to develop a community support system. “**Let’s go back 60 years to the federal Community Mental Health Act of 1963 when hundreds of thousands of women and men with brain disorders were released from psychiatric hospitals.**” Promised –as President Kennedy said at the time – that “**the cold mercy of custodial care would be replaced by the open warmth of community. Despite good intentions -- tragically -- that promise was never kept -- not nationally, nor in Ohio -- and the community system was never fully built. Ohio closed psychiatric hospitals without prevention or residential services in place and without building full capacity outpatient care. Many Ohioans in need of support became homeless or languished in jail or in prison.**”

And now -- every day in Ohio, we have families in crisis. They need immediate help. And too often, they have nowhere to turn, no idea where to go, so their loved ones suffer -- and sometimes, these individuals -- our friends, our family members -- die needlessly.”

**We can change this,** “**While we can never fully remedy the mistakes of the past, we can resolve to change the course of history moving forward by making help visible, accessible, and effective in all communities in Ohio.**”

The Governor has already started to address some of these issues. This week he announced new initiatives around the behavioral health workforce crisis and for kid’s mental health. What I am asking you today is to take this opportunity to change 340 of the Revised Code in a way that allows the ADAMH Boards to plan and execute a promise of a community support system that was never met. Again, we appreciate Rep. Swearingen’s attempt to help this problem, but those living with mental illness and their families in most cases do not know what ADAMH Boards or Agencies are and do not care how many sit on the Board of Directors. What they care about is having services and supports when crisis occurs, or a person needs a place to live, and be surrounded by supports. Let me end by saying, today and too often individuals coming out of very short-term hospital stays (4 or 5 days) are sent to the streets. Not only a terrible waste of dollars, but more importantly the human pain of

those with mental illness and their families continues without hope. I ask you today to give the 500,000 citizens of this State who deal with this mean illness hope. That the mental health system will be changed to provide unavailable services that are desperately needed.

I have also shared for the record our latest NAMI Ohio News Briefing. I ask that the Committee address the issues shared in that document and support the Governor as he announces changes that will save lives.

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