

Senate Finance Committee

Testimony of Bob Spada, Board Member
National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio
May 25, 2023

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, and Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance Committee, my name is Bob Spada and I am a Board Member of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio often referred to as NAMI Ohio. I am also an advocate for individuals with mental illness and their families, having also served on the NAMI National Board of Directors. Why am I here today? Because I have the lived experience as a former State Senator and Parent to speak to the needs of individuals too often last on the priority list.

On Sunday night of Labor Day weekend in 2004 at 10:45 PM, I received the dreaded call that my then 23-year-old son was taken to the hospital in Plano, Texas. When I flew to Texas, I realized he was in a psychiatric unit at a hospital. Going through the metal doors and the security, I felt as I was entering a jail and recognized that my life and that of my family was changed forever.

As a State Senator, I did know enough to call NAMI Ohio. They helped me through the maze of the mental health system to get my son the help he needed. I'm very thankful that he is now doing well.

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. 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 a 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. Those servants working in the system are our heroes. However, make no mistake, families living with mental illness in their home provide 80% of all caregiving. Those with mental illness have not been served with the same urgency of those with other healthcare needs. On the positive side, 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 the law enforcement communities.

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. We are asking the Senate to support the Executive Budget as originally introduced by Gov. DeWine.

The priority issue and concern for NAMI Ohio is the funding for group homes that will impact 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**. We are asking you to restore the \$24 million per year to the Residential State Supplement in Governor DeWine's budget to prevent people waiting for long periods of time for housing, or worse the increase in group homes closing their doors. The individuals with the most chronic mental illnesses are the residents of these homes, and those that wait or cannot find a home end up in emergency rooms, shelters, homeless, in the criminal justice system, or worse.

At the current rate of \$36 per day, group homes simply cannot provide the services needed. These include shelter, food, staff oversight which often includes transportation, care coordination, and other essential needs of residents in these homes.

NAMI Ohio is supportive of other changes needing made to the House version of the budget such as:

1. 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.
2. Proposed changes in the House budget around prevention and wellness will result in less housing, school-based prevention, and suicide prevention. 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.

3. 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).
4. The Local Continuum of Care funding cuts will limit money ADAMH Boards can allocate for critical local programs, such as crisis, housing, outpatient, and in-patient treatment, much of which are not 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.
5. The state has made 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).

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).

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.