POSITION STATEMENT IN SUPPORT

LD 496: An Act To Clear Waiting Lists for and Ensure Timely Access to Mental Health Services for Maine Children

Presented to Maine’s Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

As the state’s largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization, NAMI Maine supports the passage of An Act To Clear Waiting Lists for and Ensure Timely Access to Mental Health Services for Maine Children. NAMI Maine works closely with the 1 in 4 Mainers impacted by mental illness state-wide and often hears stories from individuals who are seeking help, only to find that they will have to wait to receive it. The extension of MaineCare benefits in 2019 opened the door for thousands of residents to access mental health treatment in a capacity never seen, which illuminated the demand for such services. Following the expansion, approximately 40% of individuals sought mental health treatment, making it the most utilized service, and demonstrating the need for timely, accessible mental health services.

While achieving mental wellness is important throughout the lifespan, adolescents is a key point for early intervention measures. Research indicates that half of all mental disorder’s onset begins at age 14, and 75% of all mental health disorders occur by age 24. For certain disorders, such as anxiety, the median age of onset is even earlier, at just 7 years old. As such, NAMI Maine is keenly aware that our state’s youngest citizens need services that, currently, fail to measure up. Maine currently leads the nation in the percentage of children who are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and are third in the nation for percentage of children who are diagnosed with a depressive disorder. Though the achievement of the MaineCare expansion is an applaudable feat, the increase in eligibility and demand for mental health services has resulted in adding to an already over-taxed system. Maine has been recognized as having a critical shortage of mental health providers, particularly those who are able to serve children. The mental health care system experiences low reimbursement rates which creates long wait times for clients seeking treatment. To illustrate the current conditions, the CEO for Kennebec Behavioral Health, Tom McAdam, stated in 2019 that wait times for MaineCare patients can be 15-30 weeks.

With the current reimbursement rates for mental health services set, agencies are often forced to absorb the difference in cost between the rate for hourly services and reimbursement rates. This places providers in a precarious financial position and limits their ability to serve their clientele. While NAMI Maine is aware of the financial situation the state currently faces, we urge the committee to pass LD 496 to decrease wait times for mental health services for Maine children. Time is of the essence when it comes to preventative treatment.

ABOUT NAMI MAINE: Incorporated in 1984, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maine Chapter (NAMI Maine) is the state’s largest grassroots mental health organization. With support from national and regional affiliates, the agency is dedicated to building better lives for everyone impacted by behavioral health concerns. NAMI Maine
engages with leaders and community partners at all levels to improve the state’s mental health system through collaboration and education.