POSITION STATEMENT IN SUPPORT
L.D. 510: Resolve, To Reduce Stigma Regarding Substance Use Disorder by Requiring the Use of Respectful Language in the MaineCare Benefits Manual and Other Department of Health and Human Services Publications
Presented to Maine’s Committee on Health and Human Services
Wednesday, March 17th, 2021

NAMI Maine is in support of changing the language in the MaineCare Benefits Manual and other publications as indicated by this resolve. Maine continues to face the ongoing effects of an opioid crisis; 2020 shows a preliminary 512 overdose deaths, by far the highest rate yet, and the trend of almost 60 deaths in January 2021 indicates that the deadly trend is continuing. We must continue our efforts to destigmatize this illness so Mainers will seek the help they need.

Substance Use Disorder is a Mental Illness. It is specifically designated as such in the DSM-V. Mental illnesses are treatable. Most people diagnosed with a mental illness can experience relief from their symptoms by actively participating in an individualized treatment plan. The word “abuse” carries a stigmatizing negative connotation, especially as it is commonly connected to harm inflicted on another human being, such as a child or spouse.

Research tells us that professionals will judge a person differently if they are labeled as a substance abuser or someone living with substance use disorder. As reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA): Stigma isolates people, discourages them from coming forward for treatment and leads some physicians, knowingly or unknowingly, to resist delivering evidence-based treatment services. Calling someone a substance abuser unfairly labels them as deliberately choosing to continue misusing a substance, when in fact, it is an illness they cannot control.

We support changing the language to reflect the need to accept those who live with mental illness as able to recover so they will seek the help they need.

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.

iii Id.
iv https://health.usnews.com/wellness/articles/2017-06-12/is-calling-someone-addicted-to-drugs-or-alcohol-a-substance-abuser-harmful