

POSITION STATEMENT IN SUPPORT

LD 118: *An Act to Address Maine's Shortage of Behavioral Health Services for Minors*

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

Thursday, February 11, 2021

In 2018, the emergency department (ED) at Mid Coast Hospital in Brunswick alone reported seeing approximately 300-500 youth in crisis a yearⁱ. As the state's largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization, NAMI Maine hears stories every single day on our state-funded Helpline from individuals and their family members about how difficult it is to find therapeutic treatment, as well as barriers to access. Maine simply does not have enough intensive in-home services, child psychiatric beds, secure residential treatment capabilities, crisis units, and the like, for young individuals struggling with mental health and behavioral health challenges. As a result, Maine youth in crisis are often left in a state of limbo that the ED provides that leaves children receiving inadequate care in a time of intense need. Yet unfortunately the ED is often the only solution for parents who have been faced with a lack of services, an issue that has only become increasingly pronounced following the onset of the novel COVID-19. NAMI Maine wholeheartedly supports LD 118: *An Act to Address Maine's Shortage of Behavioral Health Services for Minors* and applauds the bills efforts to collect data that could lend itself invaluable in the state's future pursuits of expanding and creating avenues for responding and treating acute psychiatric distress in minors.

With 75% of mental health conditions presenting by age 24, and in recognition that the median age of onset for an anxiety disorder is now 7, NAMI Maine is keenly aware that our state's youngest citizens need services that, currently, fail to measure up. Historically, Mainer's have heard countless anecdotes that have undoubtable left gut-wrenching impressions on us all. For instance, in 2017, one 15-year-old boy who is non-verbal, diagnosed with autism, and faces behavioral problems, spent an entire week in a Maine ED after he became so aggressive his parents were forced to call 911ⁱⁱ. During a portion of his stay, he was required to be restrained by his wrists and ankles. ED's are chaotic, busy places that create atmosphere's that are counterintuitive to the needs of individuals experiencing mental health challenges. Yet individuals in ED's are disproportionately more likely to experience longer stays which increases both patient and provider dissatisfaction and increases patient morbidity and mortalityⁱⁱⁱ.

NAMI Maine urges the committee to pass LD 118 to accurately assess the dire situation youth in crisis entering ED's are facing within the state of Maine. It is only with viable data points that positive change can occur. As the adage goes, research drives policy change. Inaction of LD 118 will result in detailed reports on the numbers of youth with extended ED stays, as well as the clinical characteristics which lead to prolonged stays. This data collection measure will enable DHHS, partnered with the Children's Cabinet, to be able to succinctly summarize the data and make an informed recommendation on how to alleviate this problem. NAMI Maine looks forward to being able to intentionally provide input regarding system improvements and changes following data collection that enables us to truly understand the issue at hand.

LEGISLATIVE CONTACT

Hannah Longley, LCSW, *Director of Community Programs*
(800) 464-5767 x 2319 • hannahl@namimaine.org

POSITIONS & POLICY AGENDA
www.namimaine.org/advocacy

We understand that the state of Maine, not dissimilar to other states, is in a trying fiscal position only further complicated by the novel COVID-19 right now. As it stands today, it may not be the right time to move forward with substantial improvements to Maine’s children’s behavioral health system of care. However, the enactment of LD 118 will enable the state to take actionable steps towards preparing for the day where we are able to make those substantial system improvements. Without this data, we will not be able to accurately decide how to move forward.

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.*

ⁱ <https://www.mainepublic.org/post/hospitals-struggle-keep-developmentally-disabled-mainers-out-emergency-rooms>

ⁱⁱ See i

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28063614/>

LEGISLATIVE CONTACT

Hannah Longley, LCSW, *Director of Community Programs*
(800) 464-5767 x 2319 • hannahl@namimaine.org

POSITIONS & POLICY AGENDA
www.namimaine.org/advocacy