

March 13, 2017

Honorable Representative Neal Kurk
Chairman – House Finance Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 210-211
North State Street
Concord, NH 03301

Honorable Chairman Kurk and Committee Members,

My name is Kenneth Norton and I serve as the Executive Director of NAMI New Hampshire, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. NAMI NH does not provide treatment services, instead we provide education and support to individuals, families and other key stakeholders to improve the lives of all people impacted by mental illness. Last year through our staff and volunteers we were able to provide education and support to over 15,000 people statewide. I am here today speaking both as a family member and representing NAMI NH and I am speaking in opposition to the proposed budget and specifically the lack of adequate funding for mental health services.

Imagine frantically rushing a family member or loved one to the Emergency Department with a life threatening medical condition. Nurses and Emergency Dept staff gather information and take vital signs. After carefully assessing the patient the doctor confirms your fears and indicates the situation is very serious and potentially life threatening and will require hospitalization. But, there is a complication; there are no hospital beds available, not at this hospital or any other hospital in New Hampshire. Worse, there is a waiting list to get into the hospital and it may be weeks before your loved one can get treated – in the meantime they will be held in the Emergency Department until a bed becomes available.

Two years ago I stood before you with a similar scenario. On that day there were 15 adults and three children waiting. This morning there were 46 adults and one child. Data gathered on a daily basis is showing that the average number of adults and children waiting have tripled since the spring of 2015. The average on any given day is now over 40 adults and over 4 children. Two years ago the average wait time was days, now it is weeks. Last week there were two individuals who had been in Emergency Departments for 20 days. On February 19th we set a new all-time high, which is actually a shameful low, of 68 individuals being boarded. Holding people in a mental health crisis is wrong medically, legally, ethically, morally and economically. These are people who are suffering, and who, because of the Emergency Department setting, are not receiving adequate care or treatment to alleviate their suffering; they are merely being “boarded.”

No one needing any type of medical care should have to wait days to receive treatment. Simply stated it is *inhumane*. This truly is a crisis for these individuals, their families, and the service

providers who are unable to provide them adequate care. It is blight on the compassion and reputation of New Hampshire as a family friendly state. There are many reasons why and how we came to be in this situation and while I will not attempt to explain them today, there are several critical points I wish to make. While NAMI NH has said in the past that more beds are not the answer, with numbers steadily rising each month it is clear that more community and inpatient beds are an important part of the solution. So is the need for statewide mobile crisis response and improved reimbursement rates to deal with the workforce development challenges faced by our community providers.

On behalf of NAMI NH, I am asking for three things:

- I am asking for your leadership in requiring the Department of Health and Human Services to put forward a clear plan and proposed budget to address the crisis in our Emergency Departments and in accessing timely inpatient and outpatient care;
- I am asking you to work with Governor Sununu and your colleagues in the Senate to appropriate the funds needed to dramatically reduce or eliminate the number of people being boarded in Emergency Departments; and
- Lastly, I am asking you to hold the Department of Health and Human Services accountable for making these improvements and to monitor progress toward this goal through the Health and Human Services Oversight Committee.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kenneth J. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Executive Director