

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut
Before the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee
March 18, 2016**

**IN REGARDS TO
HB 5628 AN ACT CONCERNING THE CONVERSION OF COLLEGE SAVINGS ACCOUNTS TO
ABLE ACCOUNTS**

Good afternoon Senator Fonfara, Representative Berger and members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee, my name is Daniela Giordano and I am the Public Policy Director with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state affiliate of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental health conditions. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for quality of life for individuals and families in the community. I am writing to you today on behalf of NAMI Connecticut in regards to *HB 5628 An Act Concerning the Conversion of College Savings Accounts to ABLE Accounts*.

HB 5628 will allow families and individuals to take smart financial steps by saving for future goals such as going to college through a college savings account, but expands the options for *how to use those savings* in case something unexpected happens. For example, if the beneficiary of the college savings account cannot attend college, the college savings account can be converted into an Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) account. ABLE accounts are available to individuals who have become disabled before age 26 and receive Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or SSI. ABLE account funds can be used to pay for education, health care, and other expenses. Interest earned in the account is tax free. The accounts do not replace other planning tools such as special needs trusts, but serve as an additional tool to address financial challenges of individuals with disabilities. As an example, this option could be very beneficial for young adults who may be experiencing serious mental health challenges upon entering college and need to pause or delay their higher education to focus on their health and wellbeing. We support this effort, and are also in favor of exploring and committing to higher revenue in the upcoming fiscal year to avoid harmful and detrimental cuts to crucial community health and social services, which those same individuals and families may be relying on in order to live successfully in the community.

The current proposed budget cuts are deep and devastating. As you are well aware, a large share of the Governor's proposed budget cuts of \$560 million fall on programs, services and supports critical to individuals, children and families across the state, including the Departments of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS), Social Services (DSS), Developmental Disabilities (DDS), Public Health (DPH) and others. Proposed cuts to DMHAS alone are close to \$72 million, ten percent of their total budget.

The cuts are unfair as they disproportionately and negatively impact our most vulnerable citizens, including children, families, and individuals with disabilities and complex health needs.

The cuts are shortsighted. For example, cutting effective and cost-effective community services and supports that benefit our citizens and keep them from higher need services such as institutional care and emergency rooms while supporting them to gain and maintain stability in the community, means we as a state will forgo paying *some* money today only to find ourselves in a position of paying *a lot more for these higher cost services soon down the line*. Equally, if not more important, is the fact that these higher cost services most often do not actually address the individual's' needs, and instead only represent a Band-Aid. Examples of such shortsighted cuts with long term gravely negative consequences in the mental health system are continued cuts to mental health and substance use grants, Community Care Teams and the essential elimination of the Regional Mental Health Boards.

In order to avoid the harmful effect of these cuts, we ask the committee to explore ways for revenue increases. We support revenue ideas as previously discussed by groups like Connecticut Voices for Children, including a more progressive income tax and the elimination of certain tax breaks, among other ideas.

We can and need to make better choices. Every cut we make is a choice, and exploring and using revenue options is a choice. We must make better choices. Our state budget is a reflection of the priorities we hold as a state – we need to prioritize services for children, families and individuals in need, including mental health services and supports!

Thank you for your time and attention. Please let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

Respectfully, Daniela Giordano