Testimony of NAMI Connecticut (National Alliance on Mental Illness)  
Before the Appropriations Committee  
March 5, 2019

Department of Children and Families (DCF) budget

HB 7148, AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2021

Good evening Senators Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Susan Kelley. I am the Director of Advocacy and Policy for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state chapter of national 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 individuals, families, and children impacted by mental health conditions. I also lead NAMI Connecticut’s children’s mental health policy program, the Alliance for Children’s Mental Health (ACMH). ACMH is a collective advocacy group comprised of a broad spectrum of state stakeholders focusing on children’s mental health issues, including the critical overlap of mental health with child-serving systems of education, child welfare, and juvenile justice.

I am testifying today on behalf of NAMI Connecticut and ACMH in support of the DCF budget, however also to ask whether the DCF budget includes funding for Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs). If it does not, we oppose this omission and request that funding for JRBs be restored and maintained. We understand the state’s continuing fiscal challenges and the difficult decisions facing legislators and other policy makers regarding the state budget. We also recognize that budget cuts are tough on all state agencies and the people they serve. At the same time, certain state services and supports must be prioritized and that is the case for clinical youth mental health and other services, such as those provided through JRBs. The 85 JRBs that are currently located throughout the state are a front-end community-based diversion program designed to keep youth from entering the juvenile court system.

Children with mental health conditions and substance abuse issues are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. In Connecticut, 64 percent of children involved in the juvenile justice system in Connecticut have a mental health disorder. And, 80 percent of children admitted to detention report trauma histories.\(^1\) Children of color disproportionately enter juvenile justice with untreated mental health conditions. Access to mental health issues is therefore also a health equity issue. Minority children are over-represented in juvenile justice system and under-represented in the behavioral health system. National studies tell us that youth of all races and ethnicities engage in similar behaviors.\(^2\) Unfortunately, behaviors that are treated as mental health problems in white children are often treated as delinquency in children of color.

---

\(^1\) See, CCSD presentation to Behavioral Health Services for Young Adults Task Force (2014); *Building a Trauma-informed System of Care for Children in Connecticut*, presentation to Sandy Hook Commission, 2012, Robert Franks, PhD, Connecticut Center for Effective Practice, Child Health and Development Institute.

Advocates and policy makers alike agree that JRBs are a successful diversion program that has helped reduce juvenile delinquencies over the past ten years and get mental health services to kids who need them. Connecticut, through the reform work of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Council (JJPOC) has created an effective diversion model over the past several years, and JRBs are an important part of the diversion plan.

The Governor’s proposed budget recognized the state’s priority in funding diversion services by stating that 4.1 million in funding was included to “maintain important clinical interventions and other services utilized by non-delinquent youth following the reallocation of juvenile funding by the legislature to the Judicial Branch, further enabling the department to meet Juan F. requirements.” (See, Gov. Proposed Budget, February 2019, p. 28.) However, JRBs are not a specific line item under the DCF budget and it is unclear whether JRB funding is included in the proposed 4.1 million described above.

Unfortunately, funding for JRBs got lost in the shuffle when responsibility for committed delinquent youth was transferred from DCF to the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch last year. JRBs were however funded through mid-2019 using found federal dollars as a stop gap measure, but there apparently is no plan for funding after federal dollars run out.

Funding for JRBs must be restored. They are an integral part of the state’s diversion system, providing less costly and more effective means for schools, police, and families to address youth misbehavior and improve mental health outcomes for children.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan R. Kelley
Director of Advocacy
NAMI Connecticut