Testimony of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Connecticut
By Lisa Winjum, JD, Executive Director
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Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, and members of the Judiciary Committee, as the Executive Director of the Connecticut State office of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI Connecticut), I am here today in support of S.B. No. 1059 – An Act Concerning the Correction Accountability Commission, the Office of the Correction Ombuds, the Use of Isolated Confinement, Seclusion and Restraints, Social Contacts for Incarcerated Persons and Training and Worker’s Compensation Benefits for Correction Officers.

NAMI is the nation’s largest mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all people affected by mental health conditions. NAMI Connecticut and its nine local affiliates provide support groups and educational programs for people with mental health conditions and their loved ones and advocates for policies to improve the lives of people affected by mental health conditions.

NAMI opposes the use of solitary confinement, referenced in this bill as “isolated confinement,” and equivalent forms of administrative segregation. Eliminating solitary confinement is a priority for NAMI at both the state and federal level. States that have adopted proactive efforts to eliminate solitary confinement have documented highly positive results that include reduced psychiatric symptoms, less violence, and significant cost savings.

It is routinely documented that solitary confinement is used extensively in correctional settings for juveniles and adults with severe psychiatric symptoms. A 2018 national report documented that about 10% of all people held in segregated settings are diagnosed with serious mental illness¹. And, isolating people, especially for long periods of time, causes severe psychological distress—even for people without a pre-existing mental illness³.

Rates of serious mental illness among those held in supermax facilities, the most extreme form of segregation, are even higher. In some states, it is reported that up to 30% of those in facilities utilizing the most extreme forms of solitary confinement and social isolation are diagnosed with serious mental illnesses². The unfortunate and very difficult truth is that solitary confinement and other forms of “administrative segregation” are often used to control and manage inmates with serious mental illness. For inmates with a pre-existing mental illness, being put into solitary confinement can cause extreme suffering, worsen symptoms and be similar to torture.
Solitary confinement for juveniles and adults with serious mental illnesses causes extreme suffering; has adverse long-term consequences for cognitive and adaptive functioning; disrupts treatment; causes or worsens symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and hallucinations; and impedes rehabilitation, recovery and community re-integration.

The long-term effect of solitary confinement is devastating. Solitary confinement can leave people with mental illness unable to function in correctional facilities and unprepared to successfully reenter communities after their release. For juveniles with mental illness, the long-term effects of solitary confinement may be even more damaging. For young people with brains still developing, extreme isolation can have a permanent impact and significantly increase the risk of suicide and self-injury.

Rather than using isolation strategies that can cause long-term damage, NAMI urges federal, state and other correctional authorities to provide mental health care alternatives to solitary confinement and significantly reduce the use of extreme isolation. Limiting the use of solitary confinement and eliminating its use for high-risk populations, including people with mental illness, people with intellectual/developmental disabilities and juveniles, would result in fewer psychiatric symptoms; lower rates of violence; improved re-entry and transitions back into the community; and significant cost savings to correctional systems.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions.


