

**TESTIMONY OF NAMI CONNECTICUT
BEFORE THE BIPARTISAN TASK FORCE ON
GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND CHILDREN'S SAFETY**

SCHOOL SAFETY WORKING GROUP

JANUARY 25, 2013

Senator Boucher, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Task Force's School Safety Working Group, my name is Sara Frankel and I am the Public Policy Director for Children, Youth and Young Adults with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of 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 illness. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups across the state, educational programs, and advocacy for improved services, more humane treatment and an end to stigma and economic and social discrimination. We represent individuals who actually live with mental illness and parents and family members of individuals living with mental illness.

NAMI Connecticut joins the state, the nation and the world in extending our deepest sympathy and condolences to all those affected by the tragedy that took place at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012. We may never know what went so terribly wrong that led to the school shooting. However, we do know that if any good is to come from this tragedy, it is in recognizing that we can and must do better in creating a positive school climate for learning and social development. This will allow all of our children to enjoy safer, more rewarding educational experiences on the way to reaching their full potential.

We must do a better job of training school personnel, law enforcement professionals, families and other community members on issues that can all too often unnecessarily leave children feeling isolated or bullied in the school setting, including children experiencing emotional and behavioral challenges as well as children who live with psychiatric disabilities. Fortunately, there are many programs available to train school personnel about mental health issues. For example, NAMI's *Parents and Teachers as Allies* is a program that offers mainstream educators and school administrators an in-service training covering the neurobiological basis of mental illness, the signs and symptoms associated with early onset of serious mental illness in children as well as local and state resources to share with parents. The program is delivered by a trained panel consisting of a family member, a person living with mental illness and an educator. Such programs need to be offered in every school. Additionally, school personnel should know when to refer to Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services (EMPS) instead of law enforcement. EMPS is a great resource that can be strengthened and utilized more often.

In addition to education and training of school personnel about mental illness, comprehensive school-based mental health services are essential to achieving a positive school climate. It is widely recognized that twenty percent of all children have a diagnosable mental health condition. However, only a quarter of these

children have access to the services they need and deserve. That leaves about 90,000 Connecticut school children who have emotional-behavioral problems with their needs unmet. Drop-out rates among students classified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are alarmingly high, over 50%. Connecticut must continue to fund the expansion of effective school-based mental health services and supports, including increasing the number of school social workers and school psychologists, promoting school-community partnerships and creating more comprehensive School Based Health Centers that provide medical and mental health services. During the 2012 Legislative Session, the Legislature approved funding for the creation of ten new School Based Health Centers in the Alliance Districts. However, the recent rescissions cut funding for the creation of these Centers. We urge this Committee to recommend restoration of this funding.

Finally, with respect to police officers being stationed inside schools, NAMI Connecticut recognizes that some School Resource Officers can have a positive influence on children. However, the national consensus among policy researchers is that police in schools do not increase physical safety, and in fact, often bring numerous negative, unintended consequences. Nationally and in Connecticut the presence of police officers in schools has greatly increased the number of student arrests, the majority of which are not for serious or violent offenses. Rather, these arrests occur for low-level, non-violent offenses, such as breach of peace and disorderly conduct. Many of the behaviors exhibited by children that lead to such arrests are often the result of unmet behavioral and mental health needs; 65-70% of youth in juvenile detention have a diagnosable behavioral health condition.

In order to reduce the number of arrests in school of children with behavioral troubles, a memorandum of agreement should exist between the district and the police department that outlines roles and responsibilities, and school and police personnel should be regularly oriented to its implementation. The state's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, within the Office of Policy and Management, together with educators, police and others, researched and developed a model MOA for Connecticut localities to adapt and use, including a "graduated response model" that clarifies what misbehaviors should be handled (A) by teachers in classrooms, (B) with administrators, (C) with personnel like social workers, and finally, only in serious cases, (D) with law enforcement. National experts, like those at the National Juvenile Justice Network have recommended this approach, and Connecticut communities using it have seen remarkable decreases in arrests without compromising safety. During the 2012 Legislative Session, legislation was proposed to mandate, if a district has police in its schools, the adoption of such a MOA. It also outlined data collection and reporting requirements around the arrests of students. We urge you to recommend similar legislation this year.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.