

TESTIMONY OF THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS (NAMI) OF CONNECTICUT

Before the Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety

Gun Violence Prevention Working Group

JANUARY 28, 2013

Senator Looney, Representative Miner, and members of the Task Force's Gun Violence Prevention 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 supports sensible gun control laws that keep highly lethal weapons out of the hands of dangerous individuals, whether or not they have a mental illness.

Mental illness exists in every state, every city and every neighborhood of the United States. One in four adults—nearly 60 million Americans—experiences a mental health disorder in a given year. One in 17 lives with serious mental illness, and one in 10 children lives with a serious mental or emotional disorder. **We would like to remind the Legislature that most people living with a mental illness are not violent and violent behavior is not linked to a psychiatric diagnosis.** The US Surgeon General determined over a decade ago that "the overall contribution of mental disorders to the total level of violence in society is exceptionally small."¹ In fact, persons living with mental illness are more likely than the general public to be victims of violent crimes than perpetrators.²

Connecticut is required to report to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) people who have been "committed to any mental institution" or "adjudicated as a mentally defective." Notwithstanding the fact that the later term is highly offensive, we urge the Legislature to think carefully and thoughtfully when faced with any proposals that would broaden the current law to include anyone who seeks mental health

¹ *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, 1999.

² Teplin, L.A., McClelland, M.G., Abram, K.M. & Weiner, D.A., (2005), *Crime Victimization in Adults with Severe Mental Illness, Comparison with the National Crime Victimization Survey*. Archives of General Psychiatry. 62, 911-921; Appleby, L., Mortensen, P. B., Dunn, G., & Hiroeh, U. (2001). *Death by Homicide, Suicide, and Other Unnatural Causes in People with Mental Illness: a population-based study*. The Lancet, 358, 2110-2112.

treatment, or all people who have been in psychiatric hospitals, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. We already know that the pervasive stigma that prevails towards mental illness serves as a deterrent for people to seek help when they need it. Broadening the criteria in such a manner would further deter people from seeking treatment, the last thing anyone should want.

NAMI Connecticut stands ready to inform the Gun Violence Prevention Working Group and the entire Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety on the effective treatments and services that allow individuals living with mental illness to achieve and maintain recovery and lead successful lives. This includes more funding for community-based services, stronger school-based mental health programs, adequate insurance coverage, and expansion of supportive housing units.

Thank you for your time. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us for further information.