

December 13, 2017

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

We are writing today to ask for your support for an issue that has long been a top priority for the National Alliance on Mental Illness-New York State (NAMI-NYS): housing programs with wrap-around services for people with psychiatric disabilities. NAMI-NYS is the statewide chapter of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots organization dedicated to improving the lives of people living with a mental illness and their families. A firmly held belief by NAMI-NYS is that housing with support services is critical to recovery. The lack of availability of these crucial services is a major concern for many of our thousands of members and the one in five families in New York impacted by mental illness.

On top of the lack of housing availability, we also see many problems with the limited community based housing options operating through the Office of Mental Health. These programs serve the most challenging clients, manage the health and mental health for people with many co-occurring conditions and manage complicated medication regimens that were never anticipated when the models were developed. They serve numerous priority populations that were chosen specifically because of their very high needs. These program models originally were not created to serve these clients, and the state has failed, year after year, to provide adequate funding to effectively manage the growing challenges.

NAMI-NYS has traditionally been critical of the state's goal to transition the care of those with the most serious and persistent forms of mental illness from the state hospital system to community based care. This is not because we believe people with mental illness should be locked away and separated from the community, but because in talking with housing providers we have come to understand that they were not equipped to handle this population as stated above. One of the reasons we have modified our stance on this issue is because we believed that the reinvestments into community care would give housing providers the tools they needed to mirror the type of all-encompassing care people received in a hospital setting. We are disappointed that to date this has failed to be the case.

More troublesome for many of our members is that since providers must give priority to those coming from hospitals, it leaves little to no room for those whom are not the state's priority, but desperately need these services. Many of our members are senior citizens who are caring for their adult children living with a serious mental illness. The ability to properly care for them is diminishing as they age and to many their top worry is what will happen to their children once they are no longer alive or able to care for them. The options for these people are extremely limited. Clearly more needs to be done and proper investments must be made.

The fact that housing providers have received flat-funding levels for decades is disappointing, scary and dangerous. We fear that the alternatives to appropriately funding housing programs will be people living with a mental illness destined to wind up homeless, incarcerated or overly dependent on emergency room services. These tragic outcomes are the nightmare for many of our members and too many of them have seen their loved ones experience these results. None of these avoidable, negative consequences are acceptable to us and they should not be acceptable to you and New York State. This is a major human rights and social justice issue that demands your immediate attention and action. Failure to do so will certainly lead to disastrous conclusions.

Our helpline is receives calls daily from people who cannot find housing programs for their loved ones. We see first-hand how housing providers are struggling to hire and retain staff and provide continuity of care which is vital to recovery in the community setting. We fear that they are being bent to the point of breaking, and it terrifies us when we hear that many feel that they simply cannot continue under the current structure.

It is extremely important that the state address these issues in this budget cycle. We are proud to participate in the Bring It Home campaign and request that you have a serious discussion with its representatives before we reach the point where this fractured system is beyond repair.

Thank you for listening to our pleas.

Sincerely,



Wendy Burch
Executive Director



Irene Turski
Government Affairs Chair

Cc:

Paul Francis, Esq., Deputy Secretary for Health and Human Services for New York State
Ann Sullivan, M.D., Commissioner, NYS Office of Mental Health
Christopher Tavella, PhD, Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner
Robert Myers, PhD., Senior Deputy Commissioner & Division Director, NYS Office of Mental Health
Emil Slane, CFO, NYS Office of Mental Health
Lou Raffaele, Chief Budget Examiner for Mental Hygiene, NYS Division of the Budget
Moirra Tashjian, Associate Commissioner, NYS Office of Mental Health
Shelly Weizman, Esq., Assistant Secretary for Mental Hygiene
Kerri Neifeld, Assistant Secretary for Human Services
Todd Scherrumen, Unit Head, Human Services, Housing and Intergovernmental Affairs