

Ariel Coffman

NAMI NYS Board Member

Thank you Wendy, I am proud to be here today representing NAMI NYS and the tens of thousands of NY state families and individuals who live daily with the devastating effects of serious and persistent mental illness.

Not only have I worked in the behavioral health system for nearly 20 years, I am also the caregiver and daughter of a father who lives with a serious mental illness so these issues truly mean more to me than just data, statistics, and politics. I ask all of you to envision a family member that you care deeply about struggling to recover from a life-changing illness that effects their ability to reason, their physical health and their ability to maintain the social ties that mean so much to them. This is what families and caregivers of people with serious mental illness face every day. We work tirelessly to trouble shoot a fragmented health system that lacks appropriate resources just to ensure that our loved ones get the medication, health care, and housing that they so desperately need in order to remain stable and connected to daily activities that many of us just take for granted like planning a meal, calling a friend or following up on our physical health needs.

As de-institutionalization has progressed families have been faced with the troubling reality of whether or not their loved one will be able to integrate into a community that they have limited ties to, in a world that frequently stigmatizes them fighting a day to day battle to recover from mental illnesses that they did nothing to cause.

My father lives in mental health housing and receives treatment at a community behavioral health clinic. Most recently he experienced a life changing event. In his mid-sixties he began to experience tremendous pain in his back, to the point where his 6'5 frame was literally bent over a walker for months. He couldn't get out of the house to shop and we needed an aide to come to his house just to complete simple daily tasks. His psychiatric symptoms began to increase due to his fears about surgery and his inability to fulfill his daily routine.

Fortunately, this story does not end in sadness like so many others because he lives in a permanently subsidized apartment on Long Island. He was able to have surgery, go to rehab, receive consistent psychiatric treatment, and return home to an apartment that was safe and supported. Without the mental health housing system, these triumphs would not have been possible. That is why funding existing mental health housing at sustainable rates is imperative.

When properly funded and staffed this type of housing allows people to focus on recovery in a supportive and safe environment. I believe that it is the duty of our legislature to set aside political discourse and achieve a moral imperative by ensuring people like my father do not lose their housing or face limitations on their opportunities to leave institutional settings because there are no appropriately funded community housing options with wrap around services that fulfill the obligation this state has to ensuring its disabled citizens

receive the best quality care and treatment so that they can recover, grow and reconnect with their communities in a meaningful way.

NAMI-NYS calls upon the legislature to make our families a priority by funding mental health housing and services at a sustainable rate and by ensuring access to mental health services, properly prescribed medication and adequate resources such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and mental health professionals who specialize in treating co-occurring issues such as substance use and chronic medical conditions.

Adequately funded Mental Health Housing keeps people from falling through the cracks, helps avoid unnecessary incarcerations, hospitalizations, and repeated trips through the homeless system. We thank you for your motivation and desire to fix these long-standing issues that have created a crisis that is exacting its tolls on constituents, communities, and our families every day.