



NAMI  
National Alliance on Mental Illness

# NAMI | New Hampshire

January 29, 2019

Honorable Chairman Kevin Cavanaugh  
Senate Commerce Committee  
State House Room 100  
107 North Main Street  
Concord, NH 03301

Dear Chairman Cavanaugh and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kenneth Norton and I serve as Executive Director of NAMI NH, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. On behalf of NAMI NH, I am here today to speak in favor of SB 59.

By way of background, I am very familiar with trauma from my years of clinical work in community mental health as well as leading the development of NAMI NH's Connect Suicide Prevention Program where I provided training and technical assistance to the NH National Guard as well as the Department of Defense and Defense Center on Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury. For the past four years, I have also served as an appointed member of the legislatively established Military and Veterans Commission on PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury. I have also provided training to Law Enforcement for over thirty years, and NAMI NH currently provides mental health training for all cadets coming through the NH Police Standards and Training Academy. But I consider my real expertise as a family member who has intimately experienced the effects of a life-changing traumatic event on a loved one and how the post-traumatic stress disorder which followed affected every dimension of their life, school, work, relationships and health, eventually resulting in addiction, repeated incarceration and homelessness. I am now also very fortunate to witness the effectiveness of appropriate treatment and the joys of recovery and healing.

From those experiences, two pieces of knowledge I would like to impart is that while there are clusters of symptoms that we can recognize resulting from trauma; how it manifests itself can be unique to that individual. The second is evidenced by Veterans that trauma can lie dormant for periods of time and then be triggered resulting in the rapid onset of symptoms.

Our first responders are our everyday super heroes. They leave their homes and get into their uniforms each day knowing they are placing their lives on the line. Without hesitation they run into burning buildings or place themselves in harm's way to help and save others. On a daily basis they see the worst of humanity. Murder and terrible crimes, horrific accidents, life threatening medical conditions, tragic fires, drug overdoses, and suicide. When they take their uniforms off at the end of the day it is difficult or perhaps impossible to leave all that behind. Yet they return home to their families and loved ones and they do their best to not bring those events home with them.

*Find Help, Find Hope*

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They truly are super heroes, but they are first and foremost human and we need to look no further for that evidence than the body of research showing police and first responders experience higher rates of trauma and depression than the general population. As a result, NAMI NH believes that the proposed legislation to include acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder under the definition of injury in RSA 281-A:2, XI is an important step forward in promoting their resilience and health.

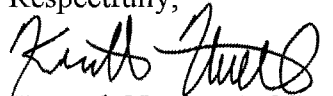
Suicide is an important and preventable public health issue, one which first responders are intimately familiar with. In New Hampshire suicide is the second leading cause of death ages 10-34, the third leading cause of death ages 35-44 and the fourth leading cause of death ages 45-54 and the 10<sup>th</sup> overall. Sadly, first responders have significantly higher rates of suicide than the general population. Some estimates indicate that suicide is the leading cause of death for fire and emergency medical service providers. More police die by suicide annually than by gunfire and traffic accidents combined. Tragically, during the past two years, suicide has taken the lives of four New Hampshire police officers.

This year HB 240 was submitted to establish a new commission to study the incidence of suicide among New Hampshire first responders. The previous commission on trauma and first responders under SB 553 was one of the most well organized and well attended commissions I have participated in. NAMI NH joined other groups providing testimony on HB 240 in suggesting that rather than creating a new commission, that a specific recommendation be made as part of this bill to include findings and recommendations regarding first responders and suicide as part of the SB 59 commission.

We need to do more to support our police and first responders particularly in terms of making it easier for them to come forward and get help and treatment for trauma before their conditions worsen to the point where it is impairing their ability to function at work or at home, or they are contemplating taking their life. Easing burdens for worker's compensation claims is an important step in the right direction and likely to decrease risk for first responders and improve outcomes for those of us they serve.

Please vote SB 59 as ought to pass. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,



Kenneth Norton, LICSW  
Executive Director