

September 22, 2021

Senator Gary Daniels
Chairman, Committee to Develop a Plan for the Closure and
Replacement of the Sununu Youth Services Center
State House Room 103
107 North Main Street
Concord, NH 03301

Chairman Daniels and Honorable Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of NAMI NH, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Our mission is to improve the lives of all people impacted by mental illness and suicide. We are not treatment providers, we do that through support, education, and advocacy. I have been employed at NAMI NH since 2003 and have served as the Executive Director since 2011. I have multiple family members with mental illness and some who have co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorders. I am a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker (LICSW) and have formally been a licensed foster home. I am an adoptive parent through the Division of Children Youth and Families (DCYF). I have served as a subject matter expert for the Department of Defense (DoD), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and closer to home have served on numerous commissions and workgroups including Governor Sununu's School Safety Preparedness Task Force, and his Law Enforcement Accountability and Transparency Commission.

That said, I want to be clear that I do not consider myself an expert in the area of juvenile justice. I believe there are others who you have already heard from who are much more knowledgeable in this area than me. I have not been able to attend the first few meetings, and I don't know what others have testified to, so I apologize in advance if this is covering the same ground. National research indicates that between fifty and seventy-five percent of youth involved in the juvenile justice system have a mental health diagnosis and therefore, I will keep my comments focused on mental health.

I would like to start by congratulating you! It is truly amazing to see the progress that has been made in leading us up to this day and the planning underway for the Sununu Youth Services Center (SYSC). With the leadership of Governor Sununu, our Department of Health and Human Services, the Office of Child Advocate, and other advocates, the Legislature has recognized the importance in investing in prevention and upstream programs and supports with the result being that our census at the Sununu Youth Services Center (SYSC) has been steadily reduced over the past few years. While hard to quantify, the positive result of these changes on individual youths and their families is profound. Thank you! Whatever is decided regarding the future of the SYSC, it will be important to continue to support the focus on prevention and upstream services and programs. This includes key recommendations for youth in the Department of Health and Human Services 10-Year Mental Health Plan such as focusing on

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social determinants of health and moving forward with the infant mental health plan. The creation of a DHHS Bureau of Children's Behavioral Health, and establishing a children's System of Care continuum, and the Fast Forward program have been very effective at reducing risk of out of home placement, including for youth who are involved with the juvenile justice system. Implementation this year of statewide mobile crisis response will greatly reduce the involvement of law enforcement in responding to youth and families in a mental health crisis and undoubtedly result in less arrests. Continuing to build out a continuum of residential supports including establishing a psychiatric residential treatment facility, as well as easily accessible respite care for families, as called for in the 10-Year Mental Health Plan, can provide an important alternative to the SYSC. It will also be important to have specific treatment available for youth who have a co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorder.

Continuing to support recommendations of the Governor's School Safety Preparedness Task Force undertaken by the Department of Education including implementing social and emotional learning across all grade levels and expanding programs that focus on creating a positive school climate and structured supports such as Multi-Tiered Systems for Supports and Behavioral Health (MTSSB) or Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS) are also key components to preventing and reducing youth involvement in the juvenile justice system.

For youth who are placed at SYSC or whatever residential program follows, I am struck by several key points. The first is that no matter how serious the offense for which they are sent to SYSC, they will be returned to their communities soon. Focusing on educational and vocational skill development will be very important to their future success and to reduce the potential for future involvement with the criminal justice system. Related to that is the importance of transitioning planning and follow-up. We know the risk for suicide increases dramatically during periods of transition, such as transition from incarceration or hospitalization to the community, or from military deployment to the community and I am sure it applies to youth transitioning as well. Having comprehensive transition plans and case management or follow-up will be key to insuring successful transition. This could also involve some type of peer support that would include trained peers who had prior involvement in the juvenile justice system provide support and mentoring to youth who were involved in the juvenile justice system or aging out of the system.

Thank you for the opportunity provide input to your committee. I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kenneth Norton', written over a white background.

Kenneth Norton, LICSW
Executive Director

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