



October 14, 2021

Mr. Tom Donovan
NH Charitable Trust Division
NH Dept of Justice
33 Capital Street
Concord, New Hampshire 03301

RE: NAMI NH Testimony on Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health – GraniteOne Health Merger

Dear Mr. Donovan,

My name is Kenneth Norton, and I am the Executive Director 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 through support, education, and advocacy. I have family members who have mental illness as well as substance use disorders. I am submitting these comments on behalf of NAMI NH.

Dartmouth Hitchcock Health is a true leader in our state in the area of mental health and substance use disorders. For over 30 years, under contract with the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), they have provided high quality psychiatric and medical services to patients at New Hampshire Hospital. As an academic institution, they provide psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and other professionals the opportunity to learn about the treatment needs of people with severe mental illness and perhaps more importantly they learn about the passion for this work from their teachers and others involved in the public mental health system. A side benefit to being a teaching facility is that it has clearly helped New Hampshire with recruitment and retention efforts for these specialty areas. Dartmouth is also a world-renowned research facility known for developing best practices in the area of co-occurring disorders, supported employment, trauma and other areas related to mental health and addiction. Dartmouth Hitchcock Health has also invested heavily in statewide efforts to increase awareness about mental illness and reduce the prejudice and negative attitudes which many people in the general public still harbor toward people with mental illness and/or substance use disorders.

As with NAMI NH's position regarding previous proposed hospital mergers in New Hampshire, we take no position for or against this proposal. However, like the themes we have expressed in previous merger testimony, we have serious concerns about whether the proposed merger will improve access to care for people with mental illness. Specific to this proposal, the

community needs assessment surveys for the communities impacted by this merger have indicated that one of their top areas of concern is in mental health and substance use disorders. For over a decade, NH has been in the midst of what Governor Sununu has repeatedly called a mental health crisis. Two of the most visible facets of this are our high rates of suicide, and the inhumane practice of people in a mental health crisis being boarded in Emergency Departments for days and weeks waiting for an inpatient bed. This crisis existed prior to COVID 19 but has certainly worsened because of the pandemic. Nationally, as well as locally, we are seeing increased stress, anxiety, and depression across all ages; however, it is hitting children and youth particularly hard. On October 11, 2021, the day before the final public hearing regarding this merger, there were 18 adults and 25 children who had been clinically assessed and found to be in need of inpatient care waiting for an inpatient bed.

Regarding the need in these communities for more inpatient psychiatric capacity the following points should be considered:

- In 2016, in the midst of this crisis, Dartmouth chose to close the voluntary inpatient unit at Cheshire Hospital. It has remained closed since then, removing an important community resource and compounding the daily ED Boarding crisis in our state.
- Dartmouth operates the only Children’s Hospital in the state, and has expertise in child psychiatry, but offers no inpatient psychiatric beds for children – demand for which has more than tripled since the start of the pandemic.
- Despite the statewide need for inpatient psychiatric beds, Dartmouth and CMC are expanding their inpatient capacity, which to the best of our knowledge, does not include any additional inpatient psychiatric beds.
- Will Dartmouth commit to increasing psychiatric inpatient capacity by reopening the Cheshire inpatient unit, adding children’s inpatient psychiatric beds, and consider adding other regional mental health inpatient beds?

Lack of inpatient capacity is only the tip of the iceberg for people attempting to access timely mental health treatment. During these public hearings Dartmouth has stated their mental and substance disorder treatment is focused on outpatient mental health care. Yet a Valley News Article from December of 2020, indicated Dartmouth was denying services to people seeking mental health treatment because Dartmouth Hitchcock Health lacked the capacity to meet the current need. This raises further areas of concern including:

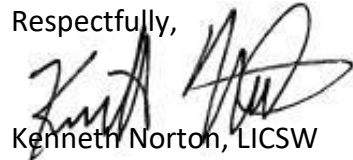
- Does Dartmouth Hitchcock Health have the capacity to meet the *current* demands for outpatient care in the regions they serve?
- If this merger is approved will Dartmouth Hitchcock Health/GraniteOne Health have the capacity to meet *current* needs of the additional communities it will be serving?
- Given the mental health impacts of the pandemic, and unknown long-term impact on mental health and substance use disorders, will Dartmouth Hitchcock/GraniteOne have the ability to meet these demands in the future?
- If the merger is approved, will mental health and addiction treatment be available at all clinics and hospitals, or will it be a specialty service only available in some areas?

NAMI NH contends that Dartmouth's stated focus on outpatient care, while not expanding inpatient care, is a philosophical and business decision that is inconsistent with their aspirational mission statement: *"We advance health through research, education, clinical practice and community partnerships, providing each person the best care, in the right place, at the right time, every time."* Further, it falls far short of meeting the current mental health needs and stated priorities of the communities involved.

During the public hearings, Dartmouth Hitchcock Health indicated they planned to invest \$20 million dollars in mental health and substance use disorder treatment over the next 5 years. However, if the merger is approved, this investment represents less than 1% of the overall budget of Dartmouth Hitchcock Health/GraniteOne Health. Despite the innovations and excellence, the institutions in this proposed merger have to offer, this invest in mental health and substance use services is wholly inadequate. This commitment does not reflect the community needs in the areas served by these many hospitals and systems.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input regarding this proposed merger. I am happy to discuss our testimony or answer any questions you or your staff have.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kenneth Norton', is written over the typed name.

Kenneth Norton, LICSW
Executive Director