

February 6, 2024

Honorable Chair Mark Pearson
House Children and Family Law Committee
Legislative Office Building Room 206-208
33 North State St., Concord, NH 03301

RE: NAMI NH Support for HB 1573

Dear Chairman Pearson and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Holly Stevens, and I am the Director of Public Policy at NAMI New Hampshire, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. NAMI NH is a non-profit, grassroots organization whose mission is to improve the lives of all people impacted by mental illness and suicide through support, education and advocacy. On behalf of NAMI NH, I am here today to speak in favor of HB 1573, relative to oversight of and criteria for residential placement of children with one caveat outlined below.

In August 2023, the Office of Child Advocate (OCA) issued a briefing regarding concerns about an out-of-state residential facility in Tennessee, Bledsoe Youth Academy (BYA), where two NH children had been placed and were residing. The OCA toured the facility and interviewed the children, finding deplorable conditions and treatment of the children. The OCA recommended the immediate return of the two children to New Hampshire along with other certification and oversight parameters. This visit to BYA by the OCA made it clear that our state needs to have better oversight of any placement facility where New Hampshire children are residing.

In September 2022, according to an Office of the Child Advocate report, 1,169 New Hampshire youth were placed with other family members, in a foster home, or at group and residential facilities. Research has found that “compared with siblings who remained at home, children placed out-of-home had an increased risks of violence, antisocial behavior, low education, common psychiatric disorders, depression or premature mortality by either suicide or injury in adulthood.” It further found that “a foster home is better than an institution and that having a one-and-only stable

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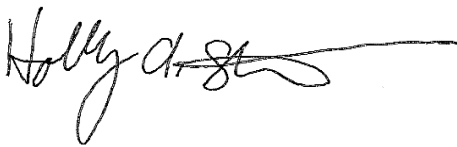
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placement is important for children's stability and well-being in adulthood."¹ Children have much better developmental and mental health outcomes when treatment is provided as close to their family and community of origin as possible where family connections can be preserved. Additionally, as referenced above, they also experience better health and social outcomes when out-of-home placements are not in institutional settings.

HB 1573 revises criteria for the out-of-home placement of children and increases oversight and certification criteria for out-of-state residential treatment programs, which NAMI NH welcomes and applauds. However, section 4 of the bill, page 3 lines 4-5, disallows a child being placed outside New England. Due to staffing and placement shortages, New Hampshire and New England do not always have the resources to accommodate all the residential placements needed for Granite State children. NAMI NH strongly feels that the bill should allow for exceptions to placement in New England to avoid long emergency room stays and to assure the appropriate level of treatment for all New Hampshire kids. Additionally, NAMI NH has concerns about the contracting provisions due to our own experience contracting with DHHS and the state. The process can be cumbersome and time consuming and as a result, could lead to delay in the care for youth.

Therefore, NAMI NH is in support of HB 1573 while urging amendments allowing for exceptions to the restriction that no child be placed outside of New England and eliminating the contracting process as outlined in the bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Holly A. Stevens". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Holly A. Stevens, Esq.

¹ Chris Gilbert, M.D., Ph.D., What Is the Impact of Out-of-Home Placements for Children?, Psychology Today, November 3, 2021

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