

April 24, 2024

Honorable Chairman Terry Roy
House Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee
Legislative Office Building Room 202-204
33 North State Street, Concord, NH 03301

RE: NAMI NH Support for SB 508

Dear Chairman Roy 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 SB 508, relative to the duties of the superintendent of the county department of corrections concerning mental health and substance use disorder screening of inmates and coordination for services upon reentry into the community.

People with mental illness deserve help, not handcuffs— yet people with mental illness are overrepresented in our state’s jails and prisons. The data regarding the intersection of criminal justice and mental health, both locally and nationally, is spotty at best. However, it is estimated that 2 in 5 people who are incarcerated have a mental illness (37% in state and federal prisons and 44% in local jails).¹ In addition, 66% of women in prison reported having a history of mental illness. According to a Union Leader article, “More than half of the inmates at prisons in New Hampshire have a mental health diagnosis. The number is even higher among women inmates: 67% were prescribed psychiatric medication in 2021.” The article goes on to state that in Rockingham County, 51% of the 170 people residing in their jail require an active treatment plan or have a significant mental health diagnosis.²

Starting in March 2022, staff from the CSG Justice Center (CSG) supported the Governor’s Commission on Mental Health and the Corrections System in actualizing two goals, one of which was improving criminal justice and public health outcomes for people in New Hampshire with behavioral health conditions who use the jail systems at a high rate. CSG found that nearly half of individuals who entered New Hampshire jails from 2019 to 2021

¹ NAMI National Mental Illness and the Criminal Justice System.

² Mark Hayward, New Hampshire Union Leader, NH faces overlap of crime, mental illness: Jail super days “they don’t belong in concrete” October 22, 2022

Find Help, Find Hope.

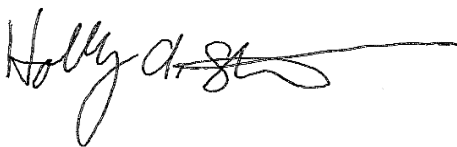
matched with Medicaid claims data, indicating a strong overlap of these populations. They also found that 93% of high utilizers of jail services who were on Medicaid had at least one behavioral health claim. Additionally, of the high utilizers of jail services who also were on Medicaid, 73% had at least one mental health primary diagnosis; 84% had at least one substance use disorder primary diagnosis; and 66% had co-occurring disorders. High utilizers of jail services were also more likely to have a serious mental illness and were more likely to have suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, or intentional self-harm. One of the recommendations that came out of the CSG study was to increase jail behavioral health and reentry services.³

Collectively, it cost NH jails an average of \$26,436,527 to incarcerate people who were jail high utilizers in 2019. When individuals with mental illness receive the right services, at the right place, at the right time, fewer folks will end up being repeatedly incarcerated, thus costing NH counties much less in jail costs.

We need to reduce criminal justice system involvement and increase investments in mental health care, even while individuals are incarcerated. SB 508, which is closely related to one of the CSG study recommendations, would ensure, with the proper screening tools, that individuals receive the proper care while in NH jails. The bill also ensures continuity of care and could reduce recidivism rates by allowing community providers into the jails to coordinate services for folks with mental health diagnoses prior to reentry into the community.

Therefore, NAMI NH urges the committee to vote ought to pass on SB 508.

Sincerely,

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

Holly A. Stevens, Esq.

³ Stephanie Yaldo-Sheena, New Hampshire Governor's Commission Reviews Justice Reinvestment Initiative Data Analysis and Proposed Policy Recommendations, May 1, 2023. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/2023/05/01/new-hampshire-governors-commission-reviews-justice-reinvestment-initiative-data-analysis-and-proposed-policy-recommendations/>

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NAMI New Hampshire • 85 North State Street • Concord, NH 03301
InfoLine: 800-242-6264 • Tel. 603-225-5359 • Fax 603-228-8848 • info@naminh.org / www.NAMINH.org