

2017 Advocacy Priorities

NAMI Maryland advocates for public and private resources that are needed to ensure the availability, accessibility and quality of comprehensive mental health treatment, prevention and recovery services throughout the state of Maryland.

At NAMI Maryland, we are acutely aware that access to comprehensive, quality mental health care can improve the lives of the more than one million Marylanders affected by mental illness. It is well past-due that Maryland's elected officials and decision-makers make a genuine and sustainable investment in accessible and quality behavioral health inpatient and outpatient treatment and services. We all know too well that the high cost of not treating mental illness vastly exceeds the cost of treatment. **In 2017, NAMI Maryland will lead advocacy efforts to improve access to timely and effective mental health treatment for individuals with mental illness and their families by focusing on the following advocacy priorities:**

- Protect and expand access to behavioral health treatment and services in the FY 2018 Behavioral Health and Medicaid Budgets.
- Ensure insurance marketplace reforms include mental health and substance use disorder coverage in every health plan and at the same level (parity) as other health conditions.
- Reduce legal barriers that disrupt access to timely and effective services for individuals with mental illness and their family members and/or caregivers.
- Improve the criminal justice system's response to individuals with mental illness and increase diversion efforts from criminal justice to community services.

Protect and expand access to timely and effective mental health treatment and services in the FY2018 Behavioral Health and Medicaid Budgets

An ideal state mental health system should be comprehensive and built on solid scientific evidence that is focused on wellness and recovery. It should be inclusive, reaching underserved areas and neglected communities, and fully integrated into the broader health care system. In Maryland, the stigma associated with mental illness continues to be a barrier to equal funding and treatment compared to other important sectors of health care. There is a need for a sustainable investment in accessible and quality mental health for inpatient and outpatient treatment and services. It is essential that individuals with mental illness have access to all levels of treatment and services necessary to keep them stable and living well in the community. NAMI Maryland advocates for a budget that reflects these priorities. A behavioral health provider rate increase is necessary to attract and retain well-trained and qualified behavioral health workforce. Community providers deliver essential services to individuals with mental illness and their families. Without state investment, patient wait times will increase and access to timely and effective services that help people live well in the community will be reduced. Maryland should provide competitive reimbursement rates to sustain high quality treatment for individuals with mental health issues.

Ensure insurance marketplace reforms include mental health and substance use disorder coverage in every health plan and at the same level (parity) as other health conditions.

Health care reform is a complex issue that is constantly evolving. Yet, there continues to be unnecessary and unforeseen barriers that disrupt treatment decisions made between patients and their doctor. Through the Health Benefits Exchange and the private marketplace, Maryland has the potential to serve as a national model on delivering comprehensive mental health care to more Marylanders than

ever before. Maryland can do more to eliminate barriers to treatment found in private and public health care plans, and NAMI Maryland strongly supports efforts to safeguard against unequal and disjointed mental health coverage.

For many individuals with mental illness, treatment and overall wellness are a constant part of their journey. Unfortunately, many know the high cost of health insurance that can be hard to keep and limited in its mental health benefits. We know that when individuals with mental illness receive timely and effective treatment, they and their families have the opportunity to lead full and productive lives. Consistent access to health care – especially mental health services is what helps keep people healthy over the long term. Continuity of care is a process facilitated by a physician-led, team-based approach to health care. By focusing on quality-of-care over time, continuity-of-care reduces fragmented treatment and is critical component to recovery. Seamless care coordination makes an enormous difference and can prevent suicides, violence, homelessness, and incarceration.

Reduce legal barriers that disrupt access to timely and effective services for individuals with mental illness and their family members and/or caregivers

Research overwhelmingly shows that when families take an active part in treatment decisions, consumer outcomes are better. Families often take on the role of daily caregivers with little or no support and training. While families do not cause serious mental illnesses, families bring a knowledge of and relationship with their loved one that is unique and can be a significant help in determining the best course of treatment and recovery. Sometimes, because of stigma and lack of information regarding mental illnesses the family is not involved. Their absence does not usually indicate that they have no concern for their loved one's well-being. Oftentimes legal barriers limit information sharing and can restrict the family caregiver from having an active role in the individual's recovery. NAMI Maryland supports collaboration between service providers, the consumer, the consumer's service manager, medical personnel, and, when appropriate, family members. Any efforts to reduce legal barriers to treatment must be consistent with applicable federal and state law.

Improve the criminal justice system's response to individuals with mental illness and their families and increase diversion from criminal justice to community services, wherever possible

Often when someone experiences a psychiatric crisis or acts out as a result of symptoms of their illness, emergency responders become involved. Instead of immediate health care treatment, many begin a difficult cycle through prisons and jails, shelters, and emergency rooms. The consequences of our current system can be costly for communities, law enforcement and corrections, and tragic for individuals with mental illness and their families. NAMI Maryland and our local affiliates place a high priority on improving the criminal justice system's response to mental illness. We work regularly with agencies at the local and state level to ensure that individuals with mental illness can live productively in the community and have access to services that will keep them healthy. In 2016, NAMI Maryland successfully advocated on behalf of the Justice Reinvestment Act, a sweeping initiative for change in our criminal justice system, including increased investment in systems and services for people living with a mental illness. This legislation is the first step towards rehabilitating our criminal justice system, but true reform will require years of work and investment, including:

- education and training for law enforcement and corrections officers;
- enhanced communications between local law enforcement and health care providers;
- appropriate placement and treatment for those in crisis; and
- a statewide system to help law enforcement recognize and deescalate crisis situations.