



June 27th, 2023

The Honorable Michael Rodrigues, Senate Chair of Ways & Means Committee
The Honorable Cindy Friedman, Senate Vice Chair of Ways & Means Committee
The Honorable Patrick O'Connor, Ranking Senate Minority Party Member
The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz, House Chair of Ways & Means Committee
The Honorable Ann-Margaret Ferrante, House Vice Chair of Ways & Means Committee
The Honorable Todd Smola, Ranking House Minority Party Member
Conference Committee
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

RE: NAMI MA Support for Budget Amendments Promoting Mental Health in Massachusetts

Dear Chair Rodrigues, Chair Michlewitz, and Distinguished Members of the Fiscal 2024 State Budget Conference Committee,

I am writing to express the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Massachusetts' (NAMI Mass) strong support for the inclusion of three critical budget amendments in the Conference Committee's version of the Massachusetts State Budget. We thank the House and Senate for your hard work on the budget so far and commend the inclusion of several significant investments in behavioral health. As a nonprofit grassroots organization, NAMI Mass' mission is to ensure that all people impacted by a mental health condition receive the support they need when they need it. Our budget recommendations emphasize the importance of creating a more equitable and accessible mental health care system in the Commonwealth.

- **\$250K for the Division of Insurance (DOI) to implement mental health parity requirements**

The concept of mental health parity is simple: insurance coverage for mental health care is equal to coverage for any other medical condition. Despite being codified in federal and state law for decades, enforcing this principle has proven challenging. Consequently, inequities persist, and individuals seeking mental health treatment often face denials of coverage. To ensure these provisions are effectively enforced, we must allocate adequate resources to the Division of Insurance. By appropriating \$250,000 to the DOI, we can bolster the capacity of the Health Care Access Bureau to handle consumer and provider parity complaints, conduct thorough investigations, and adjudicate cases. This funding will help ensure that individuals

living with mental health conditions receive the same level of care as those with physical health conditions.

- **\$192M in appropriations for the Behavioral Health Trust Fund (4000-0054)**

The federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds represent money earmarked for states to respond to the public health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exacerbated our states' mental health crisis and workforce shortage. Allocating \$192 million from the ARPA funds for the Behavioral Health Trust Fund (BHTF) would be an appropriate step toward remedying these interrelated issues. The allocation will enable Massachusetts to address barriers that impede the delivery of quality behavioral health care and services. The Behavioral Health Advisory Commission (BHAC), established to assess the state of behavioral health in the Commonwealth, has made its recommendations for the disbursement of the Behavioral Health Trust Fund. NAMI Mass, as part of the Commission, strongly supports the appropriation of these funds for the BHTF.

The Commission recommended two categories of initiatives that will have the greatest impact:

- (1) recruitment and retention of behavioral health workforce
- (2) prioritize youth access to behavioral health services and supports¹

Recommendations include expansion of the MA Repay Program, a loan repayment program critical to retaining a diverse workforce, scholarships for behavioral health degree-seekers committed to working in high need areas, and expansion of school-based behavioral health programs. This investment will allow for a clinically appropriate continuum of care that meets the diverse needs of individuals in our communities, consistent with BHAC recommendations. It will also ensure that mental health care is accessible to all, reducing disparities and promoting overall well-being across the state.

- **\$300K for the Refugee Health Promotion Program to expand mental health and wellness programming (ORI 4003-0122):**

The mental health needs of refugee communities often go unaddressed, despite the significant challenges they face. The Office of Refugees and Immigrants (ORI) is vital in providing critical health programming to these communities, including mental health education and support. ORI's Refugee Health Promotion Program (RHPP) provides ongoing individual healthcare information and access assistance to newly arrived refugees. However, the current resources allocated to the RHPP are insufficient to meet the increasing demand for mental health services. By providing an additional \$300,000, RHPP can expand mental health programming specifically tailored to the unique challenges experienced by refugees. This investment will promote mental health and wellness, facilitate integration, and empower refugees to thrive in their new homes, making Massachusetts an even more desirable place for resettlement.

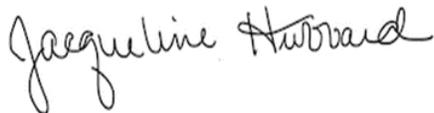
¹ The Final Report of the Behavioral Health Advisory Commission, <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/193/HD4350/Bills>.

Investing in mental health has a ripple effect on various aspects of our community, including reducing emergency service utilization, improving workplace productivity, and ultimately enhancing the overall quality of life for all residents. By prioritizing mental health and wellness, we can create a more compassionate, equitable, and thriving society. The inclusion of these three budget amendments in the FY '24 budget is an opportunity to strengthen the mental health support systems in MA.

As members of the Conference Committee, I ask you to support these budget amendments which will demonstrate your commitment to building a stronger, healthier, and more inclusive Massachusetts.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and your thoughtful leadership on the challenging task of finalizing the state budget. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide you with the budget priorities of NAMI Massachusetts as we support and represent a broad community of individuals living with mental health conditions and their families across the Commonwealth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jacqueline Hubbard".

Jacqueline Hubbard, Esq.
Deputy Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Communications
NAMI Massachusetts

Cc:

The Honorable Ronald J. Mariano, Speaker of the House

The Honorable Karen E. Spilka, Senate President