

February 23, 2021

**Senate Bill 550 - Sheila E. Hixson Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program for Service Members and Veterans – Establishment - SUPPORT**

Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a statewide network of more than 45,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations and service providers. NAMI Maryland is dedicated to providing education, support and advocacy for persons with mental illnesses, their families and the wider community.

NAMI Maryland strongly supports legislation that would establish the Behavioral Health Services Matching Grant Program for Service Members and Veterans to ensure that behavioral health providers who serve veterans and service members have adequate resources to provide these critical services.

There are nearly 400,000 veterans in Maryland. As you've heard today, the need for behavioral health services to treat issues like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety is incredible. We know that as death by suicide is on the rise, veterans comprise 18% of all deaths by suicide in Maryland – meaning Maryland's veterans are twice as likely to die by suicide.

NAMI Maryland provides FREE training and services for veterans. Anecdotally, I can report that demand for our veteran-focused peer programs has increased exponentially in the last few months. Applications by veterans to be trained to deliver these effective programs have tripled in the last four months.

One of the programs we offer to support veterans, military and their families is NAMI Homefront. This is a free, in-person, educational program for families, caregivers and friends of military service members and veterans with mental health conditions.

Based on the nationally recognized NAMI Family-to-Family program, NAMI Homefront is designed to address the unique needs of family, caregivers and friends of those who have served or are currently serving our country. The program is taught by trained family members of service members/veterans with mental health conditions.

NAMI Maryland brings veterans together to provide hope for all people affected by mental health conditions. This experience provides the opportunity for mutual support and shared positive impact. By experiencing compassion and reinforcement from people who relate to a veteran's lived experience, programs like NAMI Homefront teaches veterans and their families how to:

- Learn to care for yourself, including managing your stress
- Support your family member with compassion
- Identify and access federal, state and local services
- Stay informed on the latest research and information on mental health, including posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, anxiety, depression and substance use
- Understand current treatments and evidence-based therapies
- Navigate the challenges and impact of mental health conditions on the entire family
- Manage a crisis, solve problems and communicate effectively

Some self-reported feedback on these programs includes:

*"I realized I saw signs and symptoms of PTSD but did not know how to handle my loved one - I know better how to handle situations."*

*"You realize that he will never be the same having been through war. I learned how to treat him more as an adult than as a hurt child."— Mother of a Veteran after graduating from a NAMI Family-to-Family class held at a VA clinic.*

Nonprofit programming like ours is sustained in part by grant funding. For the past 2 years, NAMI Maryland has partnered with funders to grow our outreach to veterans and we know we can do more. In light of the recent news about the state budget and the cuts the General Assembly is facing, we recognize the difficulty of setting aside such a large amount of funding. However, any investment in the provision of behavioral health services for our veterans would truly go a long way.

Like many health conditions, early intervention often saves on health care costs, and in this case, could save lives.

Thank you to Senator Beidle for introducing this bill and we ask for a favorable report on Senate Bill 550.