

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut
Before the CT Sentencing Commission
November 3, 2016**

Comments regarding pretrial diversion and pre-arrest diversion programs

Good morning Chair Borden and members of the Sentencing Commission, my name is Daniela Giordano and I am the Public Policy Director for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state affiliate of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental health conditions. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for quality of life for individuals and families in the community. I am writing to you today to testify on behalf of NAMI Connecticut in support of pre-trial diversion programs as well as support of a related pre-arrest diversion initiative.

The Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) works with the Connecticut court and probation systems to prevent individuals with mental health conditions from being incarcerated for minor offenses. This cost-effective approach saves money in the courts and Department of Corrections and instead offers individuals access to appropriate services and supports through DMHAS, which pay off in the short and long term both for the person and the involved systems.

This person centered pre-trial diversion process involves the following steps: after a person has been arrested for a minor offense, the individual receives information about their scheduled court date. When they are on the court's docket and there seems to be a mental health related issue, or the person is already in the DMHAS system, a specially trained jail diversion social worker is sent to the court when the person is being arraigned. The social worker then interviews the person and talks about the person's options including the possibility of treatment. An important piece of this interaction is that the person is given a choice and options and can either continue going through the court process or agree to receiving services and supports and not go through the court process. If a person chooses to receive treatment, a recommendation is made to the judge to put the person on probation with a probation officer who is specially trained in mental health related issues. A person's progress is usually followed for a year or two and if successful, the person gets released from the program. An additional benefit to persons who have been arrested for the first time is that their record can be expunged resulting in no arrest record which supports the person even further to continue being an integral part of a community and not having to face additional obstacles regarding housing, employment and other essential parts of life in the community.

According to DMHAS, pre-trial diversion also results in the following benefits: providing humane and confidential care for persons with very complex mental health conditions who are involved in the criminal justice system, reducing recidivism of persons with mental health conditions by providing access to appropriate treatment, enhancing public safety by freeing up jail beds for violent offenders, and providing judges with additional sentencing options.

Another pre-arrest diversion program the state of Connecticut is doing really well and which is worth mentioning here is the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training which helps police de-escalate and prevent arrest when responding to low level offenses. As a pre-arrest, jail diversion model, CIT is the gold-standard for police partnerships in responding to residents who may be in a mental health or other crisis. CIT is a 40 hour block of training focusing on mental health conditions, behavioral health issues including developmental disabilities, legal standards, suicide assessment and prevention, juvenile behavioral health issues, de-escalation strategies tailored for people with behavioral health conditions and forming partnerships with local mental health providers, in order to better serve residents and support police and other law enforcement personnel in their challenging daily work.

We strongly support the continuation of pre-trial jail diversion and pre-arrest diversion programs for the benefit of our residents who are dealing with underlying oftentimes complex health issues and for the state to continue its leadership role in creating a more just and fair justice system. Both these programs are effective and cost-effective ways of keeping individuals from getting more deeply involved with the criminal justice system or getting involved in it at all, respectively, and giving people options about their present and their future.

Thank you for your time and attention. Please let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

Respectfully,
Daniela Giordano, MSW
Public Policy Director
NAMI Connecticut