

March 5, 2024

Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and distinguished members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee,

NAMI Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a network of more than 58,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations, and service providers. NAMI Maryland is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to providing education, support, and advocacy for people living with mental illnesses, their families, and the wider community.

NAMI MD supports comprehensive re-entry policies and programs for people with mental illness who are returning to their community after a period of incarceration. People with mental illness are overrepresented in our nation's criminal justice system. Of the over 32,000 people held in our state's jails and prisons, nearly 2 in 5 have a history of mental illness.

Of those who are incarcerated, 95% will one day be released and will face a variety of challenges as they re-enter their communities.<sup>1</sup> Re-entry — the period of return to a community from incarceration — can be marked by heightened stress, isolation, and hardship. For people with mental illness and substance use disorders (SUD), there is increased vulnerability and risk. Due to the lack of timely access to critical services and support for their health or mental health condition, these individuals are at a higher risk of repeated incarceration. In fact, the risk of death by suicide or opioid overdose dramatically increases in the first days and weeks after an individual is released from jail or prison.<sup>2</sup>

When leaving jail or prison, it's important to have as much support as possible to be successful and healthy. Successful re-entry begins in the weeks and months before someone is released. Gaining access to housing, social supports (food, employment, education) and community supports (family, friends, social networks) are all critical for successful reintegration. Without connections to community supports, recently released individuals are at a higher risk of recidivism. Access to mental health care is equally important. In fact, research suggests that those who have health care coverage upon re-entry are more likely to engage in services and supports that reduce recidivism.<sup>3</sup>

NAMI MD believes that public policies should encourage comprehensive re-entry planning, including:

- Providing a warm handoff to community-based mental health and substance use disorder care;
- Increasing access to medications; and
- Connecting to supports, like housing and food assistance

These policies will more effectively address mental health care needs immediately before and during re-entry — and help save lives. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report.

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<sup>1</sup> [Offender Reentry: Correctional Statistics, Reintegration into the Community, and Recidivism \(fas.org\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Mortality After Prison Release: Opioid Overdose and Other Causes of Death, Risk Factors, and Time Trends From 1999 to 2009 - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/issue-brief/health-coverage-and-care-for-the-adult-criminal-justice-involved-population/>