

February 19, 2026

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and distinguished members of the Government, Labor, and Elections Committee,

NAMI Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a network of more than 60,000 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.

At NAMI Maryland, we have a strong interest in criminal justice reform due to the longstanding criminalization of mental illness and the disproportionate involvement of individuals with behavioral health needs in the correctional system. This legislation reflects a thoughtful avenue for justice involved people to reenter their community and workforce.

Peer support is a cornerstone of healing and recovery in both mental health and substance use treatment systems. The ability to give and receive encouragement, empathy, and validation from individuals with shared life experiences fosters mutual respect, trust, and authentic connection. By creating structured opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals to support those currently incarcerated, this program helps people realize they are not alone and offers a powerful glimpse of what is possible after release.

Programs grounded in lived experience are especially effective at building hope, strengthening engagement, and supporting successful transitions back into the community. Peer-based reentry support has been shown to reduce isolation, improve outcomes, and would likely contribute to lower recidivism rates by helping individuals navigate the complex emotional and practical challenges of release. This approach aligns directly with our organization's criminal justice platform, which calls for treating justice-involved individuals with mental illness with respect and compassion.

For these reasons, NAMI Maryland strongly supports the establishment of a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist Training Program for Incarcerated Individuals. This is both a workforce development initiative and it will improve the lives of people leaving criminal justice facilities who are living with mental illness and substance use disorder. It will empower peers to build meaningful careers rooted in service and recovery.

We respectfully urge a favorable report on HB612.

Stephanie Slowly-Little
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