Legislative Priorities and Mental Health Legislation

During campaigns for the House of Delegates and Senate seats in November of 2019, many candidates put reform at the forefront of their campaigns. During the election, NAMI Virginia began a “Ask the Candidates” campaign where we reached out to all candidates to ask them their views on our legislative priorities. We received a great deal of responses from candidates about their views on items such as red flag law, Mental Health Parity enforcement, and public behavioral health services. NAMI Virginia released legislative and budget priorities based off the responses of our Membership Priority survey.

This year, NAMI Virginia’s legislative priorities were:
- Enforcement of Mental Health Parity
- Expansion of jail-based mental health services and criminal justice diversion programs
- Banning the death penalty for individuals with severe mental illness
- Full funding for the STEP-VA Initiative
- Medicaid Redesign and reimbursement rate for peer support services
- Expansion of permanent supportive housing for people with serious mental illness

There was a long list of legislation that was proposed that would have significant impacts on people living with a mental illness and their families/caretakers. You can find an in-depth look at those pieces of legislation here.

Important legislation that passed both the House of Delegates and the Senate includes:
- **SB 280** (Barker) - This bill would require the Virginia Bureau of Insurance to make an annual report on mental health and substance use disorder benefits public. While this is not the enforcement of mental health parity law we advocated for, we are hopeful this is a positive first step in continuing to advocate for enforcement.
- **SB 818** (Morrissey) - This bill establishes a state behavioral health docket advisory committee and offers judicial monitoring of intensive treatment and supervision of offenders with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse.
- **HB 744** (Watts) - Through this bill, in cases where a juvenile is being charged as an adult, if there is clear evidence of abuse of trauma, the court will not have to use the mandatory minimum sentencing.

There were pieces of legislation that were introduced that we heavily advocated for that unfortunately did not pass, including:
- **HB 280 / HB 1386 / SB 116**: Ban death penalty for serious mental illness
- **HB 1063**: Abolishes suicide as a common-law crime
- **HB 1704**: Coverage for case management services & peer support services by health insurance policies

Budget Priorities and the 2020-2022 Biennium Budget

2020 was a budget year where Governor Northam had to propose a state budget for the next two years. Once the proposed budget was released, legislators introduced budget amendment bills. The portions of the Governor’s budget and budget amendments we have been following can be found here.
Advocacy Day

This year’s Mental Health Advocacy Day was an overall success. The goal of the 2020 MHAD was to bring people with lived experience to the table to discuss mental health with their representatives. This year, NAMI Virginia partnered with Mental Health America Virginia, VOCAL, Voices for Virginia’s Children, and the Substance Abuse and Alcohol Recovery Alliance to organize and execute the day.

We had over 100 registrants who came to speak with legislators who are on the Deed’s Commission and the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. We were also graciously introduced in the galleries of both the House of Delegates and the Senate. A huge thank you to Delegate Aird and Senator Deeds for their kind words about our organizations and our missions. We received positive feedback from participants.

We unfortunately had to cap registration due to increased interest in participation. Fortunately for us, we had multiple members go to legislators on their own, make phone calls, and send emails in regard to our coalition’s budget priorities.

Regional Budget Hearings

In December 2019, Governor Northam released his proposed budget for the Fiscal Years 2021 and 2022. This budget is given to state legislators and they are eligible to propose amendments to the budget. One way that legislators get feedback from constituents about the proposed budget is through regional budget hearings in January. We had multiple members go to these hearings to provide feedback to legislators about amendments they wanted to see in the budget for increasing mental health funding.

Action Alerts

Throughout this session, our members have gone above and beyond to participate in legislative advocacy. NAMI Virginia had over 1,000 people subscribed to our action alerts who sent dozens of emails and made dozens of calls based on our action alerts. A huge thank you to all who took time to reach out to legislators to advocate for mental health!