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**TO:** Governor Task Force on Policing

**FROM:** Jessica Cruz, CEO, National Alliance on Mental Illness - California

**DATE:** June 29, 2020

**SUBJECT:** NAMI CA Response to Policing Task Force Request

NAMI California would like to thank the Task Force for your thoughtful dedication to this issue. It is imperative that throughout the process of “reimagining” policing in California that community voices are at the center of the discussion. We thank you for bringing NAMI California to the table as a part of this discussion. NAMI-CA is the statewide affiliate of the country’s largest mental health advocacy organization, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Our 60,000 active advocates and 62 affiliates include many people living with serious mental illnesses, their families, and supporters. NAMI-CA advocates on their behalf, providing education and support to its members and the broader community.

We believe that many of the challenges we face come down to four main issues: overburdened officers created by a lack of community safety net, improvements needed to the training and best practice dissemination to all points of contact in a crisis response, communities that feel unable to provide feedback and oversight to their local law enforcement, and a lack of alternative strategies for non-violent individuals in need of assistance (e.g. alternatives to 911/Police Response).

We also believe a healthy community can have a productive and mutually supportive relationship with their law enforcement agencies if we have a few key markers in place that are reinforced through systemic change. Those are:

- ✓ Community-Led Policing Strategies and Oversight
- ✓ Safe Encounters for Officers and Citizens
- ✓ Resilient and Resourced Communities
- ✓ Well Trained Officers

It is widely agreed that we ask law enforcement officers to do so much more than their training includes. Officers assume many roles within the community in addition to keeping the peace, this large expansion of roles and expectations without proper training has created a safety gap for officers and citizens. The fact is, law enforcement has become inextricably tied to the behavioral health system of care as a default first point of contact. Because of this, people in need of treatment are often criminalized.

Only 4% of Californians experience mental health issues that severely impact or limit their daily activities or functioning in any given year. However, we know that people living with a mental illness disproportionately experience use of force by law enforcement compared to other civilians. People with mental illness, especially those who are black, are disproportionately at risk of being victims of police killings than the general population. In fact, a staggering 1 in 4 police officer shootings involve people living with a mental illness. According to data provided by the California Highway Patrol (CHP), at least 16% of officer-involved shootings between 2011 and 2014 involved people with mental illness diagnoses or strong indications of mental illness. Furthermore, at least 20% of incarcerated adults have a recent history of mental illness, and more than half of Americans with a mental health issue go untreated.

If officers are properly trained, and communities possess adequate safety net program alternatives, officers and dispatchers can tailor how they engage, potentially diverting the person away from county jail and into an inpatient or outpatient facility where they can receive proper care. Improved dispatch information will improve the safety for everyone — the individual in crisis, the emergency responder, family members, and bystanders.

Through our partnership with the CHP, NAMI California helped develop their Mental Illness Response Program (MIRP), trained 11,000 uniformed and un-uniformed officers, and consulted in the development of their training curriculum. Within our local counties, NAMI plays an integral role in assisting law enforcement in Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) and partners with them in developing and staffing many of their crisis response units.

Over the past decade, NAMI California has been advocating alongside our law enforcement partners for better training, more comprehensive response units, and diverse funding in community-based organizations that can provide crisis stabilization. We urge you to consider our recommendations below, which will help California build on the small and nascent - but effective – efforts we have begun to undertake in our state.

## **Recommendations:**

- 1) **Enhance Mental Health Crisis Training for Emergency Dispatchers:** Peace officers rely on the information they receive from dispatchers. With proper training on identifying mental disorders and navigating conversations with someone dealing with a mental health issue, dispatchers can help reduce or prevent volatile interactions. In 2019, NAMI California sponsored AB 680 (Chu) that would have mandated California's Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Commission to develop training for dispatchers on: identifying indicators of mental disability, conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques, use of appropriate language, alternatives to lethal force, and identifying community and state resources to assist law enforcement.
- 2) **Expand Crisis Mobilization Teams:** Several counties in California are offering mobile units that respond to mental health crisis calls. These teams made up of law enforcement, mental health clinicians, peers with lived experience, and family members have had success in diverting individuals from jail to treatment. These teams are intended to facilitate emergency response by linking people to mental health resources rather than the criminal justice system. As a result, the burden is reduced on both the criminal justice and local healthcare systems.
- 3) **Support and Expand Behavioral Health Programs:** Once we have appropriately trained dispatchers and peace officers to respond and divert individuals in mental health crisis from the criminal justice system to treatment, we must invest in additional crisis stabilization units, mobile response teams, prevention and early intervention efforts, and inpatient and outpatient services in every community.
- 4) **Statewide Expansion of POST Innovative Grant Program:** The intent of the POST Innovative Grant Program is fostering innovations in training and procedures for law enforcement officers, with the goal of reducing the number of officer-involved shootings statewide. Trainings and workshops address implicit bias, use of force and de-escalation, cultural diversity and awareness, community policing, and officer wellness programs. There are limitations in the development and statewide scalability of this program. We suggest that POST make necessary changes for statewide implementation, expand grant amounts accordingly, and focus on community-based organizations with expertise providing the training and support (rather than solely funding law enforcement agencies to do so).
- 5) **Establish Family and Friends Training:** establish a program to initiate relationship building and sharing of knowledge between law enforcement and family and friends of a person living with a mental illness who has history of contact and interaction with law enforcement. The family and friends "unit" can provide clarity to law enforcement to help them gain an understanding of the person before a service call is needed and/or requested. This "front-loading" of a relationship can be literally be a lifesaver.

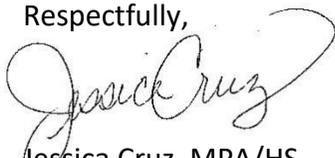
## **Funding**

Where we spend money reflects our values. Therefore, funding community-based organizations is necessary in creating structured partnerships. We must invest in organizations that are unfunded or under-funded but are doing extraordinary work. Specifically, we recommend:

- 1) Expanding SB 82 Investment in Mental Health Wellness Triage Grants: In order to fund mobile crisis teams and crisis stabilization units, we need to reinvest in SB 82 to expand the funding to counties.
- 2) Reimagine AB 109 Public Safety Realignment: While the majority of AB 109 public safety realignment funds are spent on law enforcement operations, counties have the opportunity to use more of these funds to support behavioral health programs that would ease the burden of incarcerating people who need treatment. On average, only 15% of these funds are going to the community safety net to provide needed behavioral health programs.
- 3) Expand funding and flexibility for the POST Innovative Grant Program: removing the current maximum funding limit of \$200,000. This relatively small funding amount diminishes the possibility of statewide implementation of workshops and trainings.

To create true equity in law enforcement policy development, including community members at the table is of utmost importance. Thank you for reaching out to NAMI California in recognition of our many years of experience partnering with law enforcement and seeking to help making meaningful and lasting change. We look forward to our continued relationship and hope our recommendations are helpful to your efforts. If you have additional questions, please feel free to contact me at (916) 214-6228 or [jessica@namica.org](mailto:jessica@namica.org).

Respectfully,



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CEO

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