



National Alliance on Mental Illness

NAMI California

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April 18, 2022

The Honorable Connie Leyva, Chair
Assembly Committee on Education
1021 O Street, Room 7610
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: SB 964 (Wiener) Behavioral Health – **SUPPORT**

Dear Senator Leyva:

NAMI-CA supports SB 964 (Wiener), which employs multiple strategies to retain and expand California's struggling mental health workforce.

NAMI-CA is the statewide affiliate of the country's largest mental health advocacy organization, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Our over 110,000 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.

SB 964 will address the immediate behavioral health workforce crisis and develops solutions that build a sustainable and equitable behavioral health workforce. SB 964 does this by:

- Establishing a Behavioral Health Workforce Preservation and Restoration Fund;
- Creating a stipend program for students in Master of Social Work programs with a specialized focus on public behavioral health;
- Creating an online job board where licensed providers in California may post job openings for behavioral health workers;
- Expanding access to culturally competent care by making peer support specialists a statewide Medi-Cal benefit (versus an opt-in benefit) and establishing a statewide certifying body to certify peers;
- Amending the existing Medicaid Graduate Medical Education Code to add behavioral health providers to the list of those eligible under the program;
- Developing accelerated social work programs with new coursework focused on behavioral health to get new and better trained social workers into the field quickly;
- Creating new career ladders for peers and community health workers by developing an accelerated program from certification, to associates, bachelors, and masters programs;
- Requiring a study of California's behavioral health licensing requirements to eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic barriers to well-trained and talented workers from entering the field and working at the top of their scope;
- Requiring a comprehensive landscape analysis of the behavioral health workforce so that long-term policy changes and investments are rooted in California's actual workforce needs.

Just one-third of Californians who live with a mental illness receive the care they need. One of the largest drivers of this failure is a shortage of behavioral healthcare workers. Today, 31 counties with a “high need” for mental health services report having a workforce shortage.

With healthcare workers resigning in droves and mental health needs skyrocketing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the behavioral health workforce shortage is a challenge that will become a crisis. Without essential workers to provide care, people with mild symptoms are falling into severe mental illness. For these reasons, NAMI-CA supports SB 964. I may be reached at jessica@namica.org or (916) 567-0163. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Jessica Cruz,
MPA/HS
Chief Executive Officer

Cc: Members and Consultant to Senate Committee on Education
The Honorable Scott Wiener, California State Senate