



NAMI Minnesota Guide to Legislative Action

WE MAKE THE
ROAD BY WALKING
-Antonio Machado

 **nami**
National Alliance on Mental Illness
MINNESOTA

Introduction

This handbook is designed to help NAMI members communicate effectively with their elected officials and make an impact on the legislative process.

We all have a vision for what the mental health system should be. The only way to realize that vision is to build a movement for change. We must work together to make our dreams for a better mental health system a reality.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 1 in 4 adults and 1 in 8 children and adolescents have a diagnosable mental illness during any given year. A smaller number of people are severely affected by their mental illnesses, causing disruptions in their job, school and family life. These individuals and their families look to the children's and adult mental health systems for treatment and services. These systems are fragile and do not support the current need for services. Every NAMI member knows the problems in the system and has a story to tell about how the system has not met their needs. These stories need to be told to elected officials.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness of Minnesota (NAMI Minnesota) was formally organized in 1977 after a small group of people met around a kitchen table and decided to convince the legislature to fund a state pilot project for community mental health treatment. This "kitchen table coalition" was propelled to action because there were no community services to support their family members when he or she was discharged from the state hospital. NAMI's mission today, while broader, is no different. NAMI Minnesota continues to be actively involved in the legislative process, recognizing the important role government plays in assisting or hindering children and adults with mental illnesses from living full and successful lives in the community.

At the heart of the NAMI mission statement is political advocacy. *NAMI Minnesota champions justice, dignity and respect for all people affected by mental illnesses (biological brain disorders). Through education, **advocacy**, and support, we strive to eliminate the pervasive stigma of mental illness, **effect positive changes in the mental health system** and increase the public and professional understanding of mental illnesses.*

In order to further this mission, NAMI Minnesota and its members must work diligently to impact the legislative process to improve the lives of people living with mental illnesses and their families.

To keep members informed about what is happening at the capitol, NAMI Minnesota has created a Legislative Alert Network. NAMI Minnesota also holds legislative trainings to help its members better understand the legislative process, learn more about the issues before the legislature, master effective lobbying techniques and become comfortable contacting candidates and elected officials.

What follows is an overview of the legislature and the legislative process, as well as a step-by-step guide to help you become an effective advocate for mental health issues.

The Legislature

There are 67 legislative districts in Minnesota. The district is divided into two parts (A and B) with one representative for each half and one senator for the entire district. You have one state senator and one state representative representing you. On the federal level, you have two U.S. senators representing you and one U.S. representative.

The Legislative Process

The legislative process can seem intimidating. There are many rules, and trying to figure out what is happening on a particular bill can be overwhelming. However, just as you don't need to understand the inner workings of computers to use them, you don't need to understand the technical aspects of the legislative process to have an impact on it. This section will provide an overview of how a bill becomes law and where you can most effectively impact the process.

Many of the bills proposed in the legislature have been generated by the people or organizations who are closest to the issue. Often bills are drafted because one person or family has shared their personal experience with a legislator. NAMI works with legislators every year to introduce bills that address issues impacting children and adults with mental illnesses and their families.

While NAMI works FOR bills, it also must work AGAINST bills. Sometimes legislators introduce bills that NAMI believes will be harmful to people with mental illnesses and their families and works to defeat these bills.

The state legislative process, by which a bill becomes law, is fairly straightforward. A bill is introduced by a legislator and given a number (for example, Senate File or SF 2; House File or HF 3). Each bill will have one legislator as a chief author and may have several co-authors as well. Typically the same bill is introduced in both the house and the senate. These are called companion bills. Thousands of bills are introduced each year.

Once a bill has been introduced, it is referred to the appropriate committee. There are a number of committees in both the house and the senate, each focused on a specific topic such as health and human services, K-12 education, public safety, etc. There are two types of committees: policy and funding.

NAMI is primarily focused on committees that deal with health and human services, education, children's issues, housing, employment and criminal justice. The specific committees NAMI follows change each year depending on what issues the legislature is working on and how the committees are structured.

If your representative or senator serves on one or more of the committees dealing with issues that matter to NAMI members, you will likely be asked to respond to an action alert more often than other people.

When a bill is introduced it will first be referred to one of the policy committees. Policy committees debate and vote on the overall policy of the bill. Because so many bills are introduced each session, only a few bills will receive a hearing. If the bill receives a hearing, the bill's author will briefly explain how the bill will change state law and why those changes are needed. People affected by the bill, as well as organizations like NAMI, can speak for or against the bill. The bill's author and anyone testifying may have to answer questions from members of the committee.

Members of the committee may try to make changes to the bill, called amendments, which will be voted on. Once all of this is finished, the committee votes on the bill and sends it either to another policy committee, to a funding committee or to the full house or senate for a vote.

The other type of committee, finance or "money" committees, discuss and vote on how much money will be spent on a particular area of government. There are money committees for every major section of government. Any bill that needs state funding must go through one of these committees.

Each money committee is given a "target" which is the specific amount of money they are expected to appropriate to programs in their area (health and human services, education, etc.). The money committees often put the bills they pass into one enormous bill called an omnibus appropriations bill. There is an omnibus appropriations bill for each major section of the state budget. Some of the omnibus bills, like the health and human services bill, are often over 300 pages long. The process for the money committees is similar to policy committees. The biggest difference is money committees take all those smaller policy bills and funding issues and put them into the omnibus bill.

Committees have deadlines for completing their work. The policy committees finish their work first (March or April), and the funding committees complete their work several weeks later. As a result, much of NAMI's work occurs during the first few months of the legislative session.

Once a bill passes all the necessary policy and funding committees, it will be sent for a vote by the entire senate or house. Bills are passed by each side (house and senate) separately. If the bills do not have identical language when passed, a conference committee is appointed to work out the differences between the bills. Conference committees are comprised of three to five legislators from each body who meet to work out the differences between the two versions of a bill. The omnibus appropriation bills almost always require a conference committee, and these committee meetings can stretch on for days.

After the conference committee reaches an agreement, the bill is sent to back to both the house and senate for a vote. If passed, the bill is sent on to the governor. The governor has three options: sign the bill into law, reject the bill as a whole (veto) or reject specific funds (line-item veto).

This is a simplified version of the process, but it should shed some light on how a bill becomes law and the importance of the committee process.

Contacting Elected Officials

“If you don’t like the way the world is, you change it. You have an obligation to change it. You just have to do it one step at a time.”

-Marian Wright Edelman

Legislators measure public support on an issue by the number of calls, e-mails and letters they receive. On many issues, even just three people contacting a legislator can affect the way he or she votes. Thus, your one call or letter does make a difference.

NAMI does encourage you, however, to organize at least 10 people in your community who would be willing to contact their legislator on a critical issue. This could include your relatives, coworkers, friends and professionals. Use every means at your disposal to spread the word about an issue and encourage people to write or call their elected officials. Call people whom you think might be interested, send out an e-mail, pass along NAMI legislative updates, or if you use social media like Facebook or Twitter, send out a message to your friends and followers.

The more people who write or call about an issue, the more successful NAMI’s legislative efforts will be. When it’s critical that our voices be heard, NAMI will ask you to reach out and urge people in your life to contact their elected officials.

It is far more effective to contact your own legislator rather than someone who represents a different community. Legislators are most concerned about and want to learn the opinions of people they represent – people who can vote for them. Once in awhile an action alert may ask NAMI members to contact a chairperson of a committee. However, generally you will be asked to contact only your own elected official.

There are many different ways to contact your legislator: personal contact, letters, phone calls and e-mails. When contacting an elected official, the most important thing to remember is to put a face on the issue. Legislators have access to data, reports, etc. What they need to hear is how public policies affect real people. Don’t be nervous when contacting your legislator – you are an expert who knows first-hand how the policies or lack of funding affects you and your family.

Your letter will be read by the elected official, and he or she will take your call. It is a myth that legislators have lots of staff. In the Minnesota Legislature, representatives share a staff person, and a senator has one aide, unless he or she is a committee chair. Your elected official really does read his or her letters and e-mails and will personally return your calls.

Remember to always be polite and friendly. The old saying “you catch more flies with honey than vinegar,” is especially true when dealing with elected officials. Never threaten that you won’t vote for someone – chances are they will be in office for many years. It is best not to burn any bridges. Over time, through education and life experiences, legislators may change their views on these issues.

Personal Contact

Personal contact is the most effective way to contact a legislator. It’s a real person, with a real story, meeting the elected official. NAMI members can visit their legislators during Mental Health Day on the Hill or make appointments to visit them at another time. You typically have only a short time (ten minutes) to visit with a legislator, so it is important to be organized and to plan your “speech.”

When the legislature is not in session, you may want to organize a house party or take a legislator to visit a local program, such as a drop-in center or residential treatment facility. If it is election season, consider attending candidate forums, giving time or money to the candidate of your choice and if the candidate knocks on your door – tell them your story.

When meeting with a legislator, keep these points in mind:

- Be on time.
- Introduce yourself and tell your story (briefly).
- Be positive and friendly.
- Tell them why you are visiting. If you are with a group, plan out ahead of time who will say what.
- Give reliable information.
- Ask them how they will vote on the issue.
- Thank them for their time.

Write a thank you note when you get home. This reinforces the issues you raised during the meeting. Legislators don’t receive too many thank-you notes, so they tend to remember the ones they do get.

Letters

Letters are probably the most frequently used means of connecting with legislators. They provide an opportunity to give specific reasons for supporting or opposing an issue. Letters that tell a personal story have the greatest impact. Sometimes legislators will even share such letters at a committee hearing. Letters are very effective early in the session when legislators are constantly in committee meetings and have little time to access their computer and read their e-mails.

Legislators receive a lot of mail, so it’s important to make your letter stand out. Try to give your letter a personal touch; it will help them remember you.

Consider using colored paper and/or attaching a photograph of your family and your letter can even be hand-written.

To address a letter, simply state:

The Honorable Nancy Smith
Minnesota House of Representatives
XXX State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Representative Smith:

When writing letters, keep these points in mind:

- Keep them short and simple (1 page).
- Identify the issue and include the bill number (if there is one).
- Address one issue per letter.
- Get right to the point – I do/do not support this bill or issue.
- Give clear specific reasons for your positions.
- Tell how the bill would affect you and your family or people that you know.
- Be polite and reasonable – never threaten or insult.
- Thank the legislator for his or her time and interest.
- Include your name, address and telephone number.

When you are sending e-mails, keep the same points in mind and treat e-mail like a formal letter. Additionally, use proper e-mail etiquette and avoid using all upper case letters. Never flame (insulting or using derogatory language) or spam (sending your email to the world).

E-mails are especially effective later in the session after committee deadlines are past, when legislators are in full floor sessions and have their computers with them. Never send e-mails to members of Congress because Congressional offices receive too many e-mails. If there is an urgent issue, try faxing a letter or calling.

General Outline for Letters

Paragraph 1: State why you are writing.

Example: I am writing to you because you are a member of the Omnibus Human Services Bill Conference Committee.

Paragraph 2: State your interest (parent, professional, sibling, etc.)

Example: I am the parent of a twenty-five year old son who has schizophrenia. He currently lives at home with my husband and me, along with his two younger sisters. He needs to live on his own and have a job, like other young adults. He sits around all day with nothing to do. He is isolated and is not doing very well. To live on his own, he needs affordable housing, employment support and an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team. We want him to have a full life – a life filled with expectations, joy and hope.

Paragraph 3: State your position

Example: I am in full support of the Senate provisions in the proposal that will increase funds for ACT teams, extended employment and other community mental health services. The Senate provisions contained in this bill would make it possible for our son to live more independently in the community and would relieve his isolation.

Paragraph 4: Ask for action (oppose or support)

Example: I urge you to vote in support of the Senate language in the Omnibus Human Services bill. Vote yes for a life of hope for my son.

Paragraph 5: Thank your legislators for listening to your concerns.

Example: Thank you for taking the time to consider my opinions.

Always include your name, address and telephone number on each letter. Your elected official may want to call you and discuss the issue further. When your elected official votes the way you asked him or her to, send a thank you note. If he or she votes the opposite way, express your disappointment – but be polite and respectful.

Telephone Calls

Telephone contact is effective when there is very little time to respond to an issue. During the heat of the session, it may be difficult for your legislator to return your call. Therefore it is important when leaving a message to state your name, address, the number of the bill, the position you want the legislator to take and why. If you are able to talk to your legislator directly, be respectful of his or her time and keep your call brief. Don't talk for more than five minutes, or he or she may be reluctant to return your call in the future.

Remember

- Send letters during the first half of the session.
- Send e-mails during the second half of the session.
- Call when time is of the essence.

NAMI Legislative Alert Network

“You can hitch your wagon to the stars, but you can't haul corn or hay in it if its wheels aren't on the ground.”

-Mordecai Pinkney Horton

One of NAMI's main activities is legislative advocacy. This includes educating legislators about mental health topics and informing them of the impact their proposals will have on children and adults with mental illnesses and their families. NAMI staff and volunteers contact and educate legislators, monitor committee meetings and testify at committee hearings.

To be effective, though, NAMI relies on its grassroots – its members – you. NAMI has established a Legislative Alert Network, whereby members can stay informed about what is happening at the capitol and can be notified when letters or calls are needed to key elected officials. To become a member of the Legislative Alert Network simply go to NAMI Minnesota's website and sign up. If you do not have access to the Internet, call the NAMI office, and a hard copy will be mailed to you.

Action alerts are the key vehicle used to inform NAMI Legislative Alert Network members about legislative issues. Action alerts are sent over the Internet and by mail. They contain background information on the issue, what action is needed, the date by which members need to contact their elected official and talking points. Due to the fast-paced nature of the legislative process, sometimes NAMI members are given very little time to respond. For especially urgent issues, a phone call rather than a letter may be necessary. NAMI counts on your quick response to be successful at the legislature.

NAMI Minnesota also has a Legislative Committee that meets monthly and whose members go to the Capitol regularly during the session to lobby legislators. Contact the NAMI Minnesota office for more information.

Impact

“The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit”
-Nelson Henderson

NAMI cannot depend upon campaign contributions to influence legislators. NAMI depends on its grassroots – which means you. Every time you contact your elected official, you are working to create change. Remember, your call or letter is being made on behalf of all NAMI members.

Committees are the focus of our legislative efforts, since this is where the fate of most of our bills lies. For NAMI members, the key is knowing who represents you and the committees they serve on. If you do not know who your elected officials are, you can contact the House or Senate Information Offices or visit the legislature's website at www.leg.state.mn.us. NAMI also sends out letters with this information to its members before the start of each new session.

If your representative or senator serves on a key committee, your response to an action alert is critical. If policies are to change, NAMI must target elected officials on key committees. NAMI members must respond to action alerts when needed – even if it does not affect their personal situation. NAMI's impact would be minimal if it only depended upon members who were personally affected by a bill. If your senator serves on the Education Committee and an action alert is issued about an education bill, you need to contact your senator even if the bill won't impact you personally. To truly change the world, NAMI must be a movement – working together and for each other.

Letters to the Editor

Another way to have an impact is by writing letters to the editor. Letters to the editor are one way legislators track what issues are most important to their constituents. They can be very effective in changing a legislator's opinion as well as the opinions of the general public.

If you write a letter to the editor, follow these basic rules:

- Keep it short – under 250 words.
- No attacks.
- Include address, home and work number.
- With e-mail insert text into message, do not include attachments.
- Respond to current issues.
- One topic per letter.
- Write as if you're talking to the editor.

News Reports

Having the news media do a story about a particular issue is a great way to get legislators' attention. When there is an especially hot-button issue before the legislature, NAMI may send out requests for people to speak with reporters and share their stories. Contact the NAMI office if you would like to talk with reporters from a newspaper, television or radio station about how a specific program or budget cut will impact you, your family or people in your community. Help NAMI find a few other people who will be directly impacted and have them participate as well.

Testify at Committee Hearings

If a change will have a major impact on your life or the life a loved one, such as when a program or service is cut or eliminated, consider testifying. NAMI sends out requests for people to testify on specific bills and issues, when there is an opportunity. If you are willing to testify, respond immediately to the NAMI Minnesota office. If you do decide to testify, NAMI will be there to help you every step of the way.

On the day of the hearing, remember to bring quarters for parking. If you need a ride or help with transportation, let NAMI know. Try to arrive a few minutes early and find a seat with NAMI members and staff, who will be wearing buttons to identify themselves. A list of people testifying and the order they will speak should be available. Depending on the issue, there may be a large number of people testifying, so be prepared to wait.

When it is your turn to testify, wait for the committee chair to call on you before you approach the table. Address the chairperson as Mr. Chairman or Madame Chair and the committee members as either Senator or Representative.

Keep your testimony on-target and short, about 3-5 minutes. NAMI will help you write it. Focus on how the proposed changes to state law or budget will

impact you or your loved one. Never threaten, insult or otherwise disrespect committee members, no matter how much you disagree. After your testimony, members of the committee may ask you a few questions. Committee members are usually very respectful to members of the public who testify and won't ask you difficult questions or "grill" you. NAMI staff will sit with you when you testify and can help you field questions.

Rallies

Every year NAMI and other mental health advocacy organizations host a "Day on the Hill," which is a way for the public and legislators to learn about issues affecting people living with mental illnesses and their families. The rally features speakers on a variety of topics and is a way to show legislators that people in Minnesota are concerned about mental health issues.

Sometimes when an especially important issue comes before the legislature, it is necessary to make our voices heard more urgently and forcefully. One way to accomplish this is to hold a protest at the capitol. Protests can take several forms, from people holding signs in committee hearings or outside the senate and house chambers to clever campaigns, such as sending legislators cards or little trinkets to remind them about a particular issue.

When organizing a protest it's important to follow several rules:

- No sticks on signs.
- Signs in committee hearings must be limited to pieces of paper and cannot be disruptive.
- Items sent to elected officials cannot have any real value (e.g., peanuts, torn safety nets, keys, etc.).

Keeping Informed

NAMI Minnesota has a system for keeping its Legislative Alert Network members informed. In addition to the quarterly Advocate Newsletter, NAMI Minnesota provides:

- Weekly updates and action alerts sent out over the Internet. Anyone can sign up by visiting the website: www.namihelps.org and click on Legislative Update.
- Alerts are available by mail if you call the state office.

The state legislature also provides information to Minnesotans:

- To check on the status of bills, see committee lists, sign up for weekly committee notices, etc. visit the legislature's website: <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/>.
- To obtain copies of bills or for more information call: House at (651) 296-2146 or 1-800-657-3550; Senate at (651) 296-0504 or 1-888-234-1112.

Conclusion

Change doesn't happen overnight. It happens in spurts and can be painfully slow. Still, change does happen! The vision that NAMI members have for mental health services will be achieved if we all work together. Thank you for joining the Legislative Alert Network and for taking the time to write to your elected officials.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

-Margaret Mead

My Representative is _____

Committees he/she serves on _____

Address _____

Phone _____

E-mail _____

My Senator is _____

Committees he/she serves on _____

Address _____

Phone _____

E-mail _____

Ten People to Contact Their Legislators

Name	Phone	E-Mail



National Alliance on Mental Illness

MINNESOTA

800 Transfer Road, Suite 31

Saint Paul, MN 55114

phone: 651-645-2948

toll free: 1-888-NAMI-HELPS

fax: 651-645-7379

website: www.namihelps.org

e-mail: namihelps@namimn.org