

## How to Win the State Mental Health Budget Battle

Budgets can be tedious, but engaging in the process can make a significant impact on services and supports for children, youth and adults living with mental illness in your state. In state government, the administration—Governor and agency heads—formulate the budget, while the legislature is responsible for amendment and ratification. Here are some tips for success for your NAMI State Advocacy Network:

### Start Early

- Departments of state government usually begin developing budgets 10 months before the beginning of the fiscal year.

### Develop Working Relationships with Medicaid and State Mental Health Authority Officials

- Write regular letters or e-mail messages to the director of the department/bureau or a designee expressing your concerns and ideas. Urge full funding for mental health services. Continued communication over time will result in the official routinely taking your perspective into consideration.
- Attend public hearings and advisory committees, especially budget meetings, and ask about plans for mental health funding. If there is no question and answer session, approach the official after the meeting with your question. Briefly (less than a minute) state why services are important to you and those you care about.
- Follow up with a thank you letter or e-mail. Once again, urge restoration of funding for mental health.

### Identify Budget Priorities

- Identify the ideal: What would the budget for Medicaid and State Mental Health Authority services look like if funding were available for a comprehensive array of services to promote recovery and resiliency for children, youth and adults living with mental illness?
- Identify the necessary: What basic services must be covered to maintain stability for children, youth and adults? What can the system not afford to lose?
- Review previous budgets for Medicaid and the state Mental Health Authority—especially budgets from a year prior to severe cuts. Budgets are public documents and are usually available on state websites. If you are not familiar with budgets, ask an expert to explain the budget at a NAMI or coalition meeting.

### Participate in Elections

- Ask questions about restoring funds for mental health services at campaign events, on candidate blogs and in letters to candidates. Candidates will get the message that the public cares about mental health services. Questions for Candidates and other resources are available online at [www.nami.org/election](http://www.nami.org/election).
- Vote! Encourage fellow NAMI members to vote their conscience. Remember that as a non-profit organization, NAMI cannot support or oppose a particular candidate.

## Work in Coalition

- If a mental health/substance abuse coalition or cross-disability coalition exists in your state or community, join it. If no coalition exists, work with other organizations to start one.
  - Remember that our voice represents families and individuals directly affected by mental illness. We advocate for mental health, addiction and primary care services for people living with mental illness, as well as education, employment, housing and jail diversion.
- In the rapidly changing environment of health care reform, broader coalitions may provide valuable information and connections, giving NAMI an opportunity to shape health and human services in your state.

## Take It to the District

- Legislators have time and attention for constituents in local visits and events. You will be remembered at the capitol if you took the time to visit back home.
- Work with your mental health coalition to facilitate regional forums throughout the state.
  - Feature experts equipped with information on the need to fund mental health and addictions services.
  - Develop a brief slide presentation with major budget concerns and recommendations to be presented by coalition members at each forum. Make sure coalition member organizations are represented.
  - Develop a “white paper” to provide in-depth information on funding community mental health services. Emphasize the price we pay for cutting mental health services in terms of costly emergency rooms, hospitalization, incarceration, homelessness and suicide.
  - Invite state legislators, state Medicaid and Mental Health Authority officials, local and county officials, police chief, sheriff, hospital administrator, emergency room physician, local health department, chamber of commerce and other allies to these forums. Law enforcement can be particularly compelling witnesses at these forums.

## Take It to the Capitol

- Work with your coalition to schedule a “Hill Day” at the capitol. Many state coalitions already sponsor such forums. Volunteer to help.
  - Get the word out to NAMI members statewide. The state NAMI organization may be able to secure sponsorship to pay for travel and lodging.
  - Give members information and instructions on how to make an appointment with their legislators. The legislative visit is the most important part of these events.
  - Develop one-page briefs with talking points for your issues or use materials available at [www.nami.org/stateadvocacy](http://www.nami.org/stateadvocacy).

## Keep up the Pressure

- State budgets are considered at the *end* of the legislative session. Until the gavel comes down, make sure your members consistently contact legislators to urge full funding for mental health.
- Consider hosting an information booth at the legislature during budget debates. Make your booth engaging with clear, colorful handouts and displays. Make sure NAMI members are present to answer questions and discuss the importance of mental health funding in their lives.

## **Amplify NAMI's Voice through the Media**

- Look for reporters who cover mental health issues in local newspaper (including online), radio and TV news. Invite the reporter to your NAMI meeting, local coalition event or other public events where funding for mental health services will be discussed.
- Reporters are always looking for a story or quote from someone who is personally affected. Gather stories from your members on how budget cuts affect their lives. Consider hosting a NAMI story-writing session. See the NAMI State Advocacy Website for training materials ([www.nami.org/stateadvocacy](http://www.nami.org/stateadvocacy), under "Tools for Leaders").
- When local news features mental health issues, email the reporter with thanks. Add your perspective. Politely correct misinformation, if necessary.

## **Thank, Debrief and Plan for Next Session**

- Send thank you notes or emails to those who supported the budget. The most effective thank you notes are simple and sincere.
- Meet with your NAMI State Advocacy Network and other coalition members to discuss what went well, what didn't, mistakes, plans for the future.