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For Immediate Release

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To The Tompkins County Legislature and Ithaca Common Council-

On behalf of NAMI Finger Lakes, we write to urge that you approve the recommendations in the draft Re-imagining Public Safety Plan related to the implementation of an alternative to law enforcement for crisis intervention, and to training in de-escalation and mental health, the second and fifth recommendations respectively in the draft plan.

Having contacted you last fall to urge that these issues be considered in the planning effort, members of NAMI Finger Lakes are grateful that they have been taken seriously and are supported in the recommendations. We call on you to ensure that they are included in the final plan.

These issues are extremely important to NAMI Finger Lakes because we, as family members of people living with mental health conditions, often make the calls to 911 in a crisis and we experience how a police response, even when completely well intentioned, can produce harmful results. The fact that the responding officer wears a police uniform and carries a gun frequently triggers fearful and defensive reactions, which further escalate the crisis rather than defuse it.

Additionally we cannot expect police to do what a mental health or medical professional can do; it is not what officers are hired and trained for. And the absence of mental health expertise can

lead to a misunderstanding of the behavior of the individual in crisis and to inappropriate responses to that behavior. The need or desire to bring the intervention to a relatively quick conclusion sometimes leads to rapid physical restraint, which can be extremely traumatizing for the individual in crisis and can lead not only to physical injuries but also to criminal charges, which can then subject the individual to ongoing involvement in the criminal justice system.

When these interventions take place in our home, our family members and we ourselves are subjected not only to the trauma of the response but also to the stigma of the public spectacle amplified by one or more police cars with flashing lights. In far too many cases, much needed mental health care is never accessed.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness has been at the forefront of development and advocacy of CIT, Crisis Intervention Team training, an innovative, community-based approach to improving outcomes in law enforcement response to crises. As your local affiliate, NAMI Finger Lakes was instrumental in the creation of the Ithaca Wellness and Recovery Court, a major advance in diverting individuals with mental health conditions from the criminal justice system. And last fall our Executive Director and planning team initiated an examination of alternatives to police response to mental health crises during our monthly Family Forum events. This process has included a presentation by a representative of the most well known alternative response service in the US, Oregon-based CAHOOTS, and with a conversation this month with a representative of STAR, a program more recently implemented in Denver, Colorado. To view this Family Forum series, visit the NAMI Finger Lakes YouTube Channel at this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLJbfAD-u2BmuVZOqoE8znA>

Executive Order 203 on Police Reform and Reinvention addresses racial disparities in law enforcement response. NAMI Finger Lakes recognizes that the intersection of race and mental health cannot be ignored. Decriminalizing personal crises such as mental illness, housing insecurity and other personal needs not met is an important step toward securing positive outcomes for this community. This can be achieved through compassionate, community based response to these crises when they arise to restore dignity and respect for our fellow community members experiencing these needs, rather than complicating their lives further or worse yet, ending them.

Although this study is still in process, our work thus far has convinced us that there are viable alternatives to police response to mental health crises, and that these alternatives lead to better outcomes for everyone – the person in crisis, their family, law enforcement, and the community as a whole. Consequently we urge you to approve Recommendation #2 in the draft plan, and we ask that NAMI Finger Lakes be included as part of the implementation planning, to which we can bring both the knowledge gained in our examination of existing alternatives and also our real life expertise as advocates for our loved ones.

Our study has demonstrated that even with a non-law enforcement alternative in place, there will continue to be interactions between people with mental health conditions and law enforcement personnel, albeit at a greatly reduced rate. For this reason we urge you to ensure that Recommendation #5 of the draft be included in the final plan, so that when police do encounter individuals with mental health conditions, training has provided them the tools to manage the encounter safely, effectively, and humanely.

We respectfully urge you to support these measures which can have far-reaching positive effects for our loved ones, our families and our communities, and we look forward to being part of the implementation process.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Deborah Grantham
President
Board of Directors
NAMI Finger Lakes