

March 8, 2021

Members of the House Human Services Finance and Policy Committee:

On behalf of NAMI Minnesota, we are writing in support of HF 947. The US Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that over 70% of children in the juvenile justice system have a diagnoseable mental illness. While we have made some great strides in reducing the detention of children, too many of Minnesota's laws and practices still focus on punishment and isolation – further traumatizing an already extremely vulnerable population. HF 947 will take important steps to continue transforming how we think about safety and wellness in our communities.

The research is clear that the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) for children in the juvenile justice system is disproportionately high. Moreover, children involved in the juvenile justice system consistently show disparate social and educational outcomes compared to their peers. It is long past due that our laws reflect the nearly 20 years of research on ACES and providing trauma-informed responses to children. Practices like invasive searches, solitary confinement, and indiscriminate detention serve only to reinforce traumatic experiences during some of the most precious and formative years in a young person's life. As PTSD and other mental illnesses are the norm and not the exception, ending these practices is critical not only to promote recovery, but also resiliency and opportunity for families often caught in the cycle of incarceration.

These reforms are a small but essential step in moving towards transformation of the juvenile justice system. It is important to note that when talking about juvenile justice reform, there cannot be meaningful change without addressing racial disparities. Significant changes both within and outside the juvenile system are needed to address the broad impacts of systemic racism, impacts which cannot always be quantified in data. Generational trauma in BIPOC communities is the result of a history of inequities in healthcare, education, and housing – inequities that persist today and perpetuate deeply disparate responses to BIPOC children. At NAMI Minnesota our mission is to champion justice, dignity, and respect for all people affected by mental illnesses. We are happy to support this legislation and we look forward to continued work with the legislature to realize our mission in the juvenile justice system.

Sincerely,

Sue Abderholden, MPH
Executive Director

Elliot Butay
Criminal Justice Coordinator