

Building RELATIONSHIPS with Newly Elected Policymakers

By Hannah Wesolowski

This fall, thousands of policymakers were elected for local, state and national offices. It's likely that your area has new city council members, county commissioners, district attorneys or state legislators. You may even have a new governor or different member of Congress.

It's the perfect time to start building relationships with your newly elected officials (as well as check in with those who have been reelected). These are the people who will make decisions about what mental health services and supports are available in your community. Introducing them to NAMI and to mental health advocates in their community is a key step in helping them understand mental illness and the issues impacting caregivers and individuals experiencing mental illness. With this knowledge in hand, policymakers can make informed decisions on any potential mental health policy issues they'll face while in office.

Here are a few tips on how to build effective, meaningful relationships with your community's newly elected policymakers.

Welcome Them to Office

An easy—but important—first step is to send a welcome note to newly elected or reelected officials. Congratulate them on their election, and let them know that your local NAMI Affiliate or

NAMI State Organization is available to provide information, resources and support to their constituents with lived experience. Include a flyer about the programs and services you offer, and provide contact information for your local NAMI.

Meet with New Officials

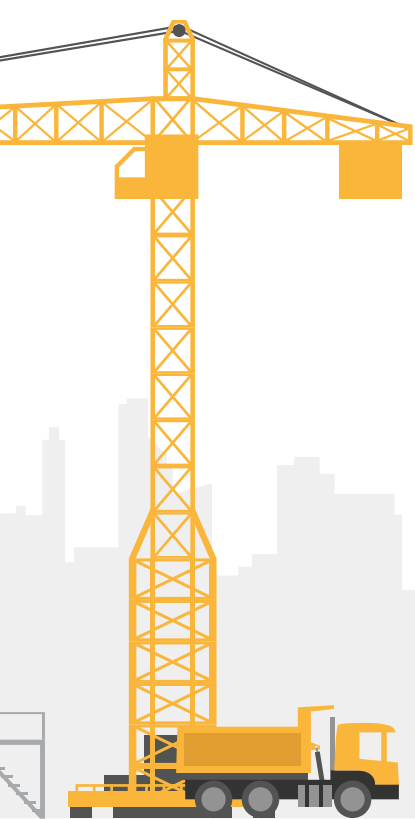
Meeting in person with new officials is also important. However, it's not the time to bring an extensive list of your policy asks. New officials are still learning the ropes, and the best way to build a relationship is to be a resource for them as they settle into their new roles.

Give them space to share their priorities, their interests and even their personal stories (which could even include their own lived experience with mental illness). This will help you learn the best ways to engage with them in the future, and what issues they might be most interested in working on with NAMI.

Introduce Them to NAMI

In your discussion, let your policymaker know the role NAMI plays in their community, and name a few of your local mental health advocates and leaders as resources for them and their staff. NAMI leaders and advocates can help in a few ways:

- *Community resource:* Every government official represents their constituents and serves their community. This means



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they might come across families and individuals in crisis. Knowing the resources and programs NAMI offers means they can direct those individuals and families to local NAMI programming.

- *Issue expertise:* Officials and their staff cover many issue areas. Because of that, they may not have deep expertise on the mental health issues in your community, such as the need for crisis services, school-based mental health supports or housing programs for people with mental illness. By building a relationship with policymakers early, these offices will know that NAMI is a qualified resource to help advise on mental health-related issues.

Find ways to stay in touch with your policymakers.

Build Lasting Relationships

An introductory meeting is only the first step. It's important that NAMI leaders and advocates build lasting relationships with both new and reelected officials—and continue to keep in contact with them throughout their terms in office. Invite your new or reelected policymakers to a local NAMIWalks. Invite them to an

affiliate meeting or a NAMI In Our Own Voice presentation. Help them feel like part of the NAMI family.

Even if you can't meet or speak directly with your newly elected official, get to know their staff. Staff can influence their boss's decisions, so spend time sharing information and building relationships with them as well.

Find ways to stay in touch with your policymakers. Many have regular newsletters, which you can sign up for on their websites. You can also follow their pages on Twitter and Facebook; social media is often where they'll post about upcoming constituent coffees, open office hours and other opportunities to meet.

Relationships with elected officials are two-way streets. Being a resource to *them* means that when important mental health-related issues come up, they know NAMI and they know you. Establishing that trust early on is critical to gaining their support for mental health services in your community for years to come. 🌐

Visit act4mentalhealth.org for resources to help you work with your newly elected policymakers.

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