NAMI news
The Nation's Voice on Mental Illness

**For Immediate Release**
**April 28, 2004**

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# NAMI Alabama Parent Testifies Before U.S. Senate On Family's Ordeal in Seeking Help For Child With Mental Illness

**Arlington, VA**—Linda Champion of Montgomery, Alabama testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee today that findings by the U.S. Surgeon General and President Bush's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health on the fragmentation of the nation's mental health care system and burden of suffering on families of children with mental illnesses are "frankly, an understatement."

Testifying for NAMI, Champion recounted the story of her 17 year old son, Lee, who was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of seven. Always an A student, he did well in school until the end of 5th grade when "the bottom fell out and our family embarked on a long downward spiral."

"Our family was under siege without support or appropriate services…It placed enormous strain on our marriage and we felt like failures as parents. Yet we loved Lee. We understood that he was struggling with the symptoms of an illness and we were not about to give up on him."

Lee was hospitalized, then placed in a residential treatment facility. After 18 months, he was returned home without a treatment plan. He then was placed out of state in a private psychiatric hospital until life time private heath insurance mental health benefits were exhausted. His parents were forced to give up custody to the child welfare system to get him treatment.

Programs recommended for him were youth detention facilities with "therapeutic components" for mental health treatment. "Imagine our shock to find out that they were actually youth lock-up facilities—complete with razor wire and guards," Champion testified.

"Today I am happy to report that Lee currently attends a private school in North Alabama, appropriately named Hope Academy. More importantly, he is back in our custody…because of a change in my husband's insurance coverage that now provides full mental health parity."

**(more)**

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Release #04-09

Champion's full testimony is available on-line at www.nami.org/championtestimony. Specifically, she called on Congress to:

- End discriminatory caps on private insurance coverage for mental health benefits
- End the practice of forcing of forcing families to give up custody of children to get them necessary treatment
- Encourage interagency collaboration and partnerships with families
- Promote education and training of all child serving professionals in early warning signs of mental illnesses in children
- Promote appropriate information and education for parents about diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses in children
- Build an effective children's mental health treatment system with an array of services

The health care needs of children with mental illnesses "should be made a national priority just as we have done for children with juvenile diabetes, arthritis, cancer and other childhood diseases," Champion said.

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*NAMI: The Nation's Voice on Mental Illness leads the national grassroots effort to transform America's mental health care system, combat stigma, support research, and attain adequate health insurance, housing, rehabilitation, jobs and family support for millions of Americans living with mental illnesses. NAMI's one thousand affiliates are dedicated to public education, advocacy and support and receive generous donations from tens of thousands of individuals as well as grants from government, foundations and corporations. NAMI's greatest asset, however, is its volunteers—who donate an estimated $135 million worth of their time each year.*

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