



Center for Public  
Representation



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## **Massachusetts Disability Organizations Sue City of Worcester for Discriminating Against People with Mental Health Disabilities in its 911 Program**

Worcester – Three mental health organizations—the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Central Massachusetts, NAMI-Massachusetts, and the Parent-Professional Advocacy League—filed a lawsuit today alleging that the City of Worcester discriminates against children, youth and adults with mental health disabilities by denying them equal access to appropriate emergency services through its 911 program.

The lawsuit, filed in the United States District Court in Massachusetts, states that Worcester dispatches armed police officers for individuals experiencing mental health emergencies even though it sends qualified health care professionals, such as EMTs and paramedics, for individuals experiencing physical health emergencies like heart attacks. As a result, thousands of people in Worcester with mental health disabilities are denied appropriate emergency mental health care and are at risk of harm and injury. The presence of armed officers often escalates a mental health crisis, resulting in the unnecessary use of force and injury to people with mental health disabilities. This unequal response discriminates against people with mental health disabilities in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. “We value our longstanding partnerships with law enforcement. At the same time, we recognize that the City’ response to individuals with mental health conditions in crisis is not equitable, effective, or adequate. The Americans with Disabilities Act is built on the simple belief that people with disabilities deserve dignity, equity, and meaningful access to the support they need,” said **Eliza Williamson, Executive Director, NAMI Massachusetts.**

The Worcester Police Department has acknowledged that over 25% of its 911 calls “are from people who are experiencing some sort of mental health crisis.” Nevertheless, as the complaint states, “[n]one of the City’s policies, procedures or practices provides for mental health professionals to be first responders to mental health emergency calls.”

“The current system leaves people in Worcester feeling that there is no available help for individuals experiencing mental health emergencies. We have hope that this lawsuit will bring about positive change,” said **Robin Bahr Casey, President, Board of Directors,**

**NAMI Central Mass.** “It is not a crime to experience a mental health crisis, and the City should not respond by sending armed police to mental health emergencies. People with mental health disabilities deserve better,” **said Steven Schwartz, Special Counsel at the Center for Public Representation.**

Children, youth and adults with mental health disabilities in Worcester are entitled under the law to timely, effective, and appropriate unarmed response, just like people experiencing other types of health emergencies. The City can remedy this discrimination by ensuring that mental health professionals respond to mental health emergencies in a timely and effective manner. “There are trained professional First Responders for fire. Trained professional First Responders for crime. Trained professional First Responders for medical emergencies. Where are the trained professional First Responders for mental health? There are none. Our children and youth deserve equal treatment,” **said Pam Sager, Executive Director, Parent Professional Advocacy League.**

The lawsuit seeks to require Worcester to provide equally effective responses to physical and mental health emergencies by ensuring that, in appropriate cases, trained and qualified mental health professionals will be the first responders to mental health emergencies, similar to physical health emergency calls. “Like people in medical crisis, people with disabilities in mental health crisis require an appropriate emergency health response that prioritizes de-escalation and treatment. The City’s public safety response often leads to escalation, and heightens the risk of violence, involuntary commitment, and arrest,” **said Tatum A. Pritchard, Legal Director at the Disability Law Center.**

Today, the disability organizations also reached out to City officials, once again, asking to meet to discuss an acceptable alternative response program.

“Under the ADA and Section 504, discrimination is unlawful, and the City is affirmatively required to provide equal access to programs and services that are fully and equally effective for all children, youth and adults with disabilities. We brought this lawsuit because the City’s 911 program does not,” **said Melissa Nott Davis, partner in Nelson Mullins’ Boston office.**

NAMI Central Mass, NAMI Massachusetts and PPAL are represented by the Center for Public Representation, a national disability rights law firm in Easthampton, Massachusetts, the Disability Law Center, the designated Protection and Advocacy for people with disabilities in Massachusetts, and the law firm of Nelson Mullins.

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