

In the News

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Conference on South Asians Living with Disabilities



New Brunswick, NJ—On June 15, 2007, the South Asian Health Project (SAH Project) and South Asian Mental Health Awareness in Jersey (SAMHAJ) were pleased to support the first conference, *South Asian Community and Disabilities: Raising Awareness, Facing Challenges, Accessing Resources*, in partnership with five leading disability advocacy groups, the Elizabeth M. Boggs Centre on Developmental Disabilities, New Jersey Protection and Advocacy, Inc, Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities, and UMDNJ-Office of Academic and Clinical Initiatives.

“There’s little information on the South Asian community and their health needs. The conference has provided an opportunity to connect and become informed,” says Ms. Shazia Anam, Ms. Shazia Naz Anam, Founder of South Asian Health Project (SAH Project). “Disabilities are often accompanied by complex issues, especially for immigrant and minority communities, such as the experience of being in a new country, often without extended family support or understanding of the complex US health care system.”

Held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in New Brunswick, NJ, the conference was well attended, with over 150 participants, from a wide range of backgrounds—members of the South Asian community, individuals living with disabilities and their families, community leaders, and providers of disability and social services. The conference opened with welcome remarks from the sponsor agencies, Dr. Deborah Spitalnik, Executive Director, The Boggs Center/UMNDJ-RWJMS and Ms. Celia Abalos, VP, UMDNJ Office of Academic and Clinical Initiatives. Invited keynote presenter, Pramila Balasundaram, Founder/Director of Samadhan, a non-governmental agency, spoke of her innovative work addressing disabilities in India.

Ms. Jennifer Velez, Esq., Acting Commissioner, NJ Department of Human Services and Honorable Upendra Chivukula, Assemblyman (D-17) – New Jersey were among the invited guest speakers. “As New Jersey’s diversity grows, so does our responsibility as government leaders. It is our duty to be sure our constituents are served in their native language and with cultural sensitivity. I am so proud to be a part of an event that celebrates this important public and social awareness,” said Acting Commissioner Velez.

The conference continued in the afternoon with panel discussions. One panel focused on providing information on resources available to affected families and individuals. The second panel featured community leaders presenting cultural issues and perspectives on disability to service providers who work with families and individuals to better inform culturally competent services.

An important aspect of the conference was the presence of family members, caregivers, and individuals living with disabilities who spoke on the morning panel, sharing their success stories with courage. Ms. Aruna Rao, Director of Educational Programs at National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey, and founder of SAMHAJ, said, “The families panel underscored the importance of noting that disabilities include various challenges and can be related to physical, developmental, and mental illnesses. It’s not always visible.”

One of the panelists, Mr. Sekhar Subramani, had advice for caregivers. “Often, [South Asian] family members and caregivers may feel love, compassion, guilt, fear. They push themselves and sacrifice their lives to take care of their loved one who has a disability. But it often becomes counterproductive. It’s important that families help patients attain independence, the opportunity to stumble and fall, to get up on our own feet.” Mr. Subramani is active in outreach for people affected by mental illness and has been living with bipolar disorder for over 20 years.

Another highlight of the day was the instrumental recitals performed by Mr. Sujeet Desai. “See me for who I am. I am a person who has feelings, who also happens to have Down’s Syndrome,” said Mr. Desai, a young musician.