

## Group marks 30 years of advocating for residents with mental illness

By JENNIFER AMATO  
Staff Writer

NORTH BRUNSWICK — The stigma of mental illness has changed over the past few decades, but society still has strides to make in dealing with a complicated issue.

One in every four adults — or about 57.7 million Americans — is affected by some type of mental illness, according to Sylvia Axelrod, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-New Jersey (NAMI NJ), which can include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, social phobia, eating disorders, obsessivecompulsive disorder, attention deficit disorder and panic disorder.

“I think there’s still a lot of stigma, no doubt. I think what has changed is that people are a lot more open about having a mental illness. It makes a big difference [when] people tell their stories.

Axelrod said that recently, more and more people are paying attention to posttraumatic stress disorder because of the large number of military personnel who are returning from overseas and cannot easily adjust to civilian life, and who may even contemplate suicide.

“May people who didn’t realize the impact [of war] kind of stop and think that this comes out after being in [dangerous] types of situations,” she said.

Also having changed in recent decades is a focus on wellness and recovery. Axelrod said there is more of a concern about how to be healthy and to seek the right drug treatments, if necessary.

“Recovery is always ongoing, because most illnesses are something that you’re living with throughout your life,” she said.

In the same vein, studies are being done regarding whether there are correlations between mental illness and substance abuse, which Axelrod said has more of a connection than previously realized.

“Research is always so far ahead of practice,” she said of researchers learning more about genetics and the brain.

In addition, Axelrod said the media has become more sensitive to the issue.

“I think things have changed in a positive direction,” she said. “Things are better, but there’s a long way to go.”

However, such understanding and compassion were not always evident in society, according to Axelrod.

In years gone by, words such as “psycho,” “crazy” and “mentally ill” had much harsher connotations than they do nowadays. She said that stigmas are ingrained in our perceptions, and that people do not realize that using such words can be demeaning.

“It’s why education is so important — if you understand that this is an illness that affects your brain, you can get treatment,” she said.

For all of the aforementioned reasons, NAMI NJ continues its mission of education and advocacy for those suffering from mental illness.

Although NAMI members do not provide treatment to consumers, the nonprofit does offer several resource and group support programs.

NAMI Smarts empowers families to advocate for themselves, while the Law Enforcement Education Program trains police officers on how to respond humanely and appropriately to mental illness crisis situations.

Every Mind Matters and Educating the Educators provide school staff members with ways to recognize the signs in children, and to help them deal with those issues, since one in 10 children live with a serious mental or emotional disorder, according to statistics provided by NAMI.

To help consumers cope, In Our Own Voice trains individuals with varying mental health conditions on how to give presentations about their illness and recovery. NAMI Connection is a recovery support group for adults focusing on coping strategies, encouragement and understanding.

In addition, the Expressive Arts Network encourages self-expression, personal growth and networking through creative activities.

Geared specifically toward veterans, the NAMI Homefront Program addresses the unique needs of veterans and their families, working in conjunction with New Jersey and the Federal Veterans Affairs.

For family members, support is just as important, so NAMI Family-to-Family and NAMI Basics provide education on how caregivers can care for themselves, as well.

“It’s important for families to understand” how to access resources, Axelrod said.

Because mental illness can also have a component of cultural sensitivity, there are four subgroups that foster the understanding of mental illness for diverse communities: CAMHOP for Chinese Americans, SAMHAJ for South Asian Americans, AACT-NOW! for African-Americans and NAMI New Jersey en Espanol for Hispanics/ Latinos.

“The stigma of hiding it or not really seeking help is a problem for each culture,” Axelrod said.

To commemorate the assistance NAMI NJ has provided in helping consumers and their family members cope, the organization held a 30th anniversary celebration last month.

The founders, family members and community supporters were invited to a luncheon in Monroe, where partner organizations were recognized for their continued collaboration with NAMI NJ.

NAMI NJ headquarters is located at 1562 Route 130, North Brunswick.

For more information, call 732-940- 0991, email [info@naminj.org](mailto:info@naminj.org), or visit [www.naminj.org](http://www.naminj.org).

*Contact Jennifer Amato at [jamato@gmnews.com](mailto:jamato@gmnews.com).*