

To: Distribution list March 1, 2015

NAMI Schenectady E-News for March 2015

Folks: This is our March 2015 monthly newsletter sent to members and friends of NAMI Schenectady, reporting on meetings and events and other items of interest. Your comments and questions are welcome. Reply to Roy Neville, editor, at namischenectady@gmail.com.

Our next NAMI chapter meeting is a lunch at noon on Friday, March 27 at the Van Dyck Restaurant, 237 Union St., Schenectady. Mark Rogerson, PhD., a neuropsychologist in private practice in Niskayuna, will be our guest speaker. Mark evaluates people as to their thinking abilities and he looks into causes of dementia, among other things, during his interviews. We're pleased to schedule someone like Mark who serves the elderly mentally ill, because too often we skip over them. We also discuss other business at our meetings and welcome people to come whether you are a member or not.

The lunch is a buffet consisting of sandwiches, salads, coffee and tea, which we pre-order from the restaurant for the group. So that we can tell the manager how many are coming, we ask that you call Roy Neville (377-2619) or Flora Ramonowski (372-6771) ahead. The lunch is \$15 including tax and tip and is paid to our treasurer, Cindy Seacord, at the lunch. Find parking at corner lot where Erie Blvd. meets Union St. We arrive 11:30-11:45 and we're in dining room to the right as you enter the restaurant. Separate Ladies Lunch group (the gals) meets March 13 at noon at Center Street Pub. Call Marianne Bergh for info, 370-4107

Kevin Moran's relatives support and education group meets every Wed night at 6 pm in classroom B-3 of Ellis Hospital. Call Kevin ahead (243-4255) if you are new to the group. These conversational sessions are a way to have a more intimate understanding of the problems and situations that families have in coping with mental illness. So, if you are one of us, please consider going to Kevin's support group (not for the person who is ill). You don't need to live in Schenectady County or to have had a relative spend time in Ellis Psychiatry. Quickest way up is to park in the Oncology lot on Rosa Rd. (Lot 1), take elevator to third floor and find classroom down the hall. We think Kevin's group has proven to be a big help to many families. Occasional speakers are invited and films are shown.

Frank Greco's family support group meets Thursday evenings 5:30 to 7 in the family resource room at the Capital District Psychiatric Center in Albany. Call Frank on 447-9611 ext-4512. Park in hospital garage. Speakers scheduled: Thurs, March 5, speaker from Albany Mental Health Clinic on AOT and jail diversion; March 19: Rebecca Bowes, OMH Regional AOT coordinator; April 2: Pharmacy Dir. Dan Woodcock on psychiatry treatments over the years; April 6: Karen Laing, Health Literacy for All, How family members can reduce stress. Frank will also meet parents as-needed at CDPC Franklin St Clinic, Schenectady late afternoons. Call office, 374-3403 for appointment.

Schenectady Peers, the band of active consumers who have shared experiences in their video hangouts on YouTube, have a website info@schenectadypeers.com but don't list current activities on it. Suggest you contact Mike Abair, 937-4262 (abair01@gmail.com)

Compeer program is open to take clients and sign up volunteer adults in Albany—Valerie Bauer heads this group for RSS, based in Albany, which matches clients (who must have a serious mental illness) with volunteers for activities as informal friends and companions. Valerie is now accepting consumer applicants who wish to have an adult companion; call her on 462-1094 ext-274. She welcomes adult volunteers 18 and over willing to put in 4 hours a month for the program.

News from our NAMI chapter meeting Feb. 6— Jason Planck, our speaker at the last lunch on Feb 6, asked us to petition the county for a program to carry out the Olmstead court decree with regard to housing and services for mentally ill people in Schenectady; and to ask for an economic disparities study to be performed. I've written to Jason about this and decided against bringing these issues up. And I've explained in a memo to our members. NAMI members and friends can speak out on these and other issues that Jason often raises at city council and county legislature meetings. Also, we were asked to attend the city's CDBG block grant hearing with the Consolidated Plan priorities last Feb. 11. But there wasn't much for us to argue for since the block grant funding is so cut and dried—most of the money goes for Schenectady police and fire salaries and to pay for the code enforcement office.

Jason also mentioned a meeting in the governor's office Feb. 23 on Employment First, a governor's commission to promote employment of disabled people. While this is a good idea, its aims are abstract. We've called for more jobs and training for recovering workers for years and instead state programs like ACCESS-VR (VESID) go unnoticed and a local rehab program, Northeast Career Svcs, has left our city. The OMH wants to close affirmative businesses like Pie in the Sky Bakery that employ people with mental illnesses. And now the state has ordered closing of sheltered workshops for developmentally disabled people, including the big Menands sheltered workshop. Where will they go? The hope is for opportunities to open up through training and development. But NYSARC is not in favor of either the closings or parallel cutbacks in services in the home and community program.

Advocacy--NAMI NYS conference in Albany Feb. 10—Two of us, Art Collins and myself, ventured to Albany for the NAMI legislative action day at the Capitol. We met with five of our state legislators or their staff members and gave out handouts with the NAMI NYS advocacy agenda focusing on the need for more beds. We also took in the midday program, heard the commissioner speak, had buffet lunch, and spoke with some of the 75 or so faithful who came in on that snowy day. You are urged to look up the action agenda on the NAMI-NYS website and write or call our area legislators. Find legislators names, phones and addresses on the Internet—see under NYS Legislature.

The main message is that the mental health services in this county are thin—they need to address shortages of professionals in both the public and private systems. We need more beds and support staff and a backlog of consumers has developed in most of the programs. The state allocated seven supported apartment beds to Schenectady but these haven't been awarded yet. We're lucky to have psych beds in the community hospitals in the region—at Ellis, Samaritan in Troy, Albany Med, St Mary's Amsterdam, Four Winds, and Saratoga and Glens Falls Hospitals. But Ellis still sends some psych patients out of area to downstate hospitals and I think Massachusetts too, if it's full up.

You can write or call about the other topics as well—prompt treatment services are lacking in the Ellis public mental health clinic where it takes 30 days on average for a new patient to see a psychiatrist. We have waiting lists for everything; give your personal accounts if you can. We need more transparency in the way the jails handle people with mental illness; we want physicians to be able to select anti-psychotic medicines for their patients on Medicaid, not the state (the governor has eliminated “prescriber prevails” protection for these drugs in the Medicaid budget). We want better pay for direct care workers and clinical workers in these community mental health programs (there is a 2% cost of living raise for both). We still need a reasonable number of state hospital beds left open in each region of the state while the state closes down a few hospitals and wards under its Centers for Excellence plan to transition patients to beds in the community. The Office of Mental Health is closing 135 state beds this year (but no beds in CDPC, Albany) while expecting to move money saved into the communities most affected by closings. We argue that we're short beds, too.

Many from area housing programs at NYAPRS legislative day at the Capitol Feb. 25--Harvey Rosenthal's group expected 700 at NYAPRS' rally day. Rally was for advocates to “tell the Governor's office, their state

legislators, committee chairs and the media that 'adequate affordable housing is essential to recovery' and to stop avoidable arrests, intolerable prison conditions and appropriate discharge and access to follow up community supports. They come to see that several decades of pioneering non-Medicaid recovery services make it into prominent placements in our emerging managed care system and that consumer choice and rights protections are in place. And they come to advocate for more personalized community based service innovations, access to medications of choice and to retain a quality work force."

Proposed Murphy's Law, "Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act"(HR 3717) resurfaces in Congress, has NAMI support. It promotes Kendra's Law-type programs (assisted outpatient treatment), eases restrictive civil commitment laws that require patients to be dangerous to self or others to be admitted for psychiatric care; would reform the national government's failure to address serious mental illness and reform HIPAA privacy laws that prevent families from getting information about a hospitalized loved one. Time Magazine ran piece in support of Kendra's Law Feb. 20 titled "Should Mentally Ill People Be Forced Into Treatment?"

Schenectady County Office of Community Services will award beds: Darin Samaha, director, says Schenectady has allocation of 7 supported apartment beds from NYS Office of Mental Health and his office will send an RFP to prospective housing sponsors soon to put the new units on line. County now has state funding to be a partner in a regional mobile crisis service to also serve Rensselaer, Saratoga, Warren and Washington counties. That's a first. Darin's office also co-sponsored a forum in the county library Feb. 25 on heroin and the effort to form a community coalition to combat the increased presence of heroin in the upstate drug trade. Speakers included Police Chief Brian Kilcullen and Sheriff Dominic Dagostino, DA Bob Carney, Bill Dejoy of Conifer Park and Stuart Rosenblatt of New Choices Recovery Ctr.

Jim Connolly, chief exec officer of Ellis hospital, resigned Feb. 5 and left the office immediately. People at the hospital can't explain except that it may have been brewing for a long time and just happened now. Paul Milton, Ellis's chief operating officer, takes over temporarily. Ellis has opened its new Emergency Dept. with many more beds and additional parking the last month while renovations continue on the old section.

Hearings planned on proposed merger of state Office Mental Health with Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. Leaders in the two agencies are now studying plans. A merger would reflect current thinking to treat patients with both mental health and addiction profiles in the same facilities; and to train doctors, nurses and social workers to manage this. But we are aware the two state agencies deal with different populations and personnel have little in common. Bringing the addicted into the fold diminishes the state's role to focus on treatment of seriously mentally ill people, which should be the business of the OMH.

Reading: Causing a stir: "The Modern Asylum", NY Times Opinion Page Feb. 18 by Christine Montross, MD. Calls for a return to asylums for patients with severe mental illness or other disabilities including autism. Mixes in psych patients with the rest even though they probably need different types of housing and some already have suitable places to live in the community. Despite an appealing argument for better care for these patients, I don't think putting people in public or private facilities out of sight is the answer. Advocates in favor of community facilities have jumped on the argument with cries that it returns us to conditions portrayed in "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest." But they didn't listen: It's proposed as a more humanitarian place to put the relatively small number of high cost patients bankrupting us who flow in and out of hospitals, jails and prisons, often homeless, drug-ridden—and whom we utterly fail to care for now.

“Continued Questions on Benzodiazepine Use in Older Patients”, NY Times, Paula Span, Feb. 13. Cites a study in Journal of American Medical Society that found there is high use and overuse of sedative-hypnotic drugs like Valium, Ativan and Klonopin by the elderly over 65, especially women. Study warns of clinical concerns with benzodiazepines including increased risk of falls and fractures, of auto accidents and reduced cognition. Also American Geriatrics Society has advised physicians to avoid this type of drugs for treatment of insomnia, agitation or delirium.

“In Alzheimer’s Cases, Financial Ruin and Abuse Are Always Lurking,” NY Times, Paul Sullivan, Jan. 30. Illustrates the issues for Alzheimers patients by describing the role of Julianne Moore in “Still Alice,” a movie about a youngish Columbia University professor with Alzheimer’s who keeps a copy of her speech in her hand to avoid forgetting in mid-sentence. The movie helps explore financial issues that families need to address when someone is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s or any other disease that causes cognitive impairment. See also NY Times Health Guide (nytimes.com/health/guides)for articles on medical and mental health topics.

Useful internet sites and reference sources: For the NAMI agenda and viewpoint, check national NAMI (nami.org), NAMI NYS (naminys.org) and our own (namischenectady.org) websites. Good source of political news from Albany and statewide is Harvey Rosenthal’s NYAPRS website (info@nyaprs.org). See Treatment Advocacy Center(tac.org.), Fuller Torrey’s organization devoted to Kendra’s Law and national issues about hospital commitment, gun laws and public safety. For housing info at national level try Technical Assistance Collaborative (tacinc.org.) For senior and disabled housing in the Capital area, read Albany Guardian Society’s “Housing Options for Senior Adults in the Capital Region, 2014-15” (albanyguardiansociety.org).

For more on patient treatment laws see D.J. Jaffe’s Mental Illness Policy Org. (mentallillnesspolicy.org). For estate and trust planning for families, check newsletters of Clifton Park attorney Ed Wilcenski of Wilcenski & Platt PLLC (wplawny.com) and the Special Needs Alliance (specialneedsalliance.org). A standard source for applying for Medicaid is Schenectady County’s Dep’t of Social Services (schenectadycounty.com.fullstory) and under it, medical assistance, medical services and managed care/SSI; it has info on homeless housing, family assistance, cash grants, food stamps, etc. The state’s main sites about Medicaid mental health are found under NYS Medicaid--NYS Department of Health; and NYS Office of Mental Health.

Criminal Justice News and Notes (report from Bob Corliss): Assemblyman O'Donnell, Chair of the Assembly Committee on Correction, is leading an effort to extend the force and effect of the 2007 SHU Exclusion Law to include inmates with developmental disabilities, inmates under age 21 and to bring state law into compliance with international human rights standards with regard to limits on time spent in solitary confinement.

NAMI-NYS and many affiliates actively advocated for passage of the SHU Exclusion Law which bars confinement of persons with a serious mental illness in solitary confinement in New York State prisons and mandates intensive treatment in its stead. While Mr. O'Donnell's bill does not yet have a sponsor in the senate, momentum is growing across the state to ban the longterm use of solitary confinement in state facilities. Media coverage of abuses in Rikers Island has resulted in greater coverage of the use of solitary confinement in New York City as well as upstate local jails and state facilities.

For several years, NAMI-NYS and its affiliates participated in the statewide coalition Mental Health Alternatives to Solitary Confinement (MHASC). It was successful in promoting the passage of the SHU Exclusion Law after several years of legislative lobbying. MHASC continues to monitor the implementation of the law and has also participated in some of the correctional staff training required by the statute. Also, by statute, the new Justice Center must conduct on-site visits to our state prisons to monitor the care and treatment of persons with a mental illness.

Our colleagues at NYAPRS have joined NAMI NYS in calling on the state legislature to ramp up state support for the expansion of police crisis intervention teams. The legislature added \$400,000 to the state budget last year.

Texas case draws fire--The state of Texas has again demonstrated its disdain for the reality of untreated serious mental illness and its impact on the behavior of a certain few people. The tragedy involving the American Sniper character, Chris Kyle and his friend, brought heartache to the two families, as well as to the family of Eddie Lee Routh who was convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

In this case, the jury took less than 2 ½ hours to determine that Routh was criminally responsible for his actions and rejected the evidence that Routh was so psychotic that he should not be convicted of a crime. In many ways this case harkens back to the very sad Andrea Yates case in which a young mother took the lives of her five children while in a serious psychotic state. As was the case ten years ago, the prosecutor's expert suggested that the defendant acted out a role he had seen on TV--just as the DA's expert argued, falsely, in the Yates case. In the Yates case, the conviction was overturned because of the expert's incorrect testimony and a second trial resulted in Ms. Yates being found not responsible and then committed to a state forensic hospital where she will likely stay.

In the Sniper case, there was substantial evidence that Mr. Routh, an Iraqi war veteran like Chris Kyle, was suffering from a serious psychotic disorder at the time of the homicides, something even Chris Kyle noticed and texted about. Notwithstanding, the jury appeared to quickly dismiss its importance and decided to go with the criminal conviction and life sentence.

One can only hope that the jury was not under the misimpression that a verdict of not guilty because of mental illness would result in the defendant's release and return to the community. In almost all such circumstances, a person like Mr. Routh would spend the rest of his life in a psychiatric hospital. He would, however, receive appropriate mental health treatment and not be treated as a criminal as he will be treated in a Texas prison. It's hoped that this tragedy moves our friends in the Veterans Administration and the Texas mental health system to intensify their efforts to reach out to those veterans who suffer from a serious mental illness and to help them live productively in our communities.

Schenectady County Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition (report from Flora Ramonowski): On Feb.25 the coalition (Laura Combs, deputy dir. of Prevention Services for Capital Region BOCES and Darin Samaha, Sch'dy County Dir. of the Office of Community Services) had their kickoff meeting at the Sch'dy Co. Public Library. There is great concern with the increase of heroin use in upstate NY. It is believed that addiction begins at an early age and someone graduates from prescription drugs to drugs such as cocaine and heroin. By educating the public and discussing the problem with young teens, it is hoped that the urge to use drugs can be prevented. This problem is having a negative impact on rich and poor and all ethnic groups--including people with mental health problems who self-medicate.

The purpose of the coalition was explained—why prevention and early intervention is so important. Substance abuse data and trends were discussed by a panel which included Robert Carney, Dominic Dagostino, Brian Kilcullen, Stuart Rosenblatt, and Bill Dejoy. A community discussion followed, which asked, What are the most significant concerns around substance abuse? It also asked for suggestions regarding the focus of the coalition and specific strategies for prevention, intervention and crisis intervention. The meeting was well attended with standing room only. The audience included city and county representatives, members from non-profit groups, national guard, police, county officers and residents. There is probability for quarterly meetings ahead.

