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## CaIMHSA Program Partner Spotlight

### The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) California

#### Stigma and Discrimination Reduction

On average there is a 10-year gap<sup>1</sup> between when a person begins exhibiting signs of mental illness and when they receive treatment, a time when conditions grow worse and quality of life can suffer. With a goal to reduce this gap by creating a supportive environment for people with mental health challenges and making it more socially acceptable for them to seek and receive help, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) California is a critical partner in the California Mental Health Services Authority's (CaIMHSA) Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Initiative. NAMI California's partnership with CaIMHSA has enabled the organization to greatly expand programs that break down stigma by engaging people with lived experience across the state as community educators and to serve as a resource for information about mental health.

NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness. There are NAMI affiliates in every state and 67 in the state of California alone. NAMI

Stigma and discrimination against people with mental illness in our society is so severe that the majority of people who experience the early signs of mental illness are afraid to ask for help.

A partnership with NAMI California is part of CaIMHSA's unprecedented effort to permanently change these deeply ingrained beliefs through training and resources to empower local communities to increase early detection and referrals and stigma reduction programs in local communities.

#### In Our Own Voice Participants Say:

"The whole presentation was fantastic and inspiring. No one is out of reach for help."

"They gave me hope that there is acceptance and that recovery is possible."

"This program shows the hope in recovery if we use all the tools available today and work toward that goal."

California provides support, education and advocacy to all those affected by mental health conditions, and their knowledge of mental health from the individual and family members' perspective plays a key role in the effectiveness of NAMI California's programs.

#### In Our Own Voice

A key part of NAMI California's goal to create a supportive environment for people with mental health challenges is the In Our Own Voice (IOOV) program. IOOV is a

<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Mental Health. (2005). Mental Illness Exacts Heavy Toll, Beginning in Youth [Press Release]. Retrieved from: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/news/science-news/2005/mental-illness-exacts-heavy-toll-beginning-in-youth.shtml>.



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powerful stigma-busting program that connects audiences directly with speakers who share their first-hand experience of living with mental illness as well as recovery. The IOOV presentations also incorporate a video that includes individuals, from young adults to older adults, and from diverse backgrounds, to help audience members gain insight into how people with serious mental illness cope with the realities of their mental health challenges while leading meaningful lives. NAMI California has found that the most compelling part of the program is the dialogue that presenters open with the audience. Since 2012, NAMI California, with resources from the partnership with CaIMHSA, has presented IOOV 462 times, reaching an audience of 8,784 people. Several IOOV presenter trainings have also taken place to keep up with the demand for presentations across the state.

In addition to educating audiences such as law enforcement, schools, safe communities, faith institutions and the general public, IOOV presenters report that the program helps them gain confidence and the pride that comes from helping others by sharing their own experience. NAMI California's studies have found that In Our Own Voice is a critical component of their participant's recovery and that participants report reduced attitudes of stigma as a result of participating in or viewing the presentation. Research has also indicated that interpersonal contact strategies, like IOOV, are effective in reducing stigmatizing attitudes and social avoidance (you can reference our AJPH article). An independent evaluation of NAMI California's efforts conducted by the Rand Corporation will provide more data that will be applied to strengthen the program.

### **Empowering Speakers to Make Change**

Robert Villanueva was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and during a peer group meeting, he witnessed an In Our Own Voice presentation. After viewing the presentation, he was inspired to become a speaker in the program.

“Standing up in front of a group and sharing my story was empowering,” said Robert. “It made me feel a sense of acceptance. The person speaking had pulled through and now he’s doing really great. I remember thinking, ‘I can do better too.’”

### **Reaching Diverse Communities with Unique Voices**

Different communities experience stigma differently, and through CaIMHSA's partnership, NAMI California is making IOOV the first speakers bureau of its kind to be adapted to reach a wide diversity of audiences. In the coming year, NAMI California will expand and adapt the program for California's Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, African American, LGBTQ and Native American populations. When audiences can see themselves in the speaker, messages of hope and recovery are more relevant.

NAMI California is extensively engaging communities to truly tailor the program with approaches that will resonate with members of these communities. Through focus groups with each community, NAMI California will gather input from these traditionally underserved communities that will be used to make presentations and videos compelling to diverse audiences. Presentations will incorporate the



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cultural information gathered in the focus groups and the speakers will conduct culturally adapted presentations to diverse audiences throughout California.

### **Ending the Silence**

The Ending the Silence program is designed to provide teens and young adults with the opportunity to learn about the signs and symptoms of mental illness and to receive tips on how to seek help. The program gives students an opportunity to learn about mental illness through an informative, interactive PowerPoint and short videos. Through the presentation, students learn symptoms, and indicators of mental illness, and are given ideas about how to help themselves or others who may be in need of support. During the program a young person living well in recovery shares his or her personal story, a powerful part of the program. Resource cards and postcards are sent home to parents provide follow-up support within the community.

Since the Summer of 2012, NAMI has given over 128 Ending the Silence presentations which have reached nearly 5000 students. Presenters are recruited through local Ending The Silence Coordinators from NAMI California affiliates, college campuses and wellness center outreach, as well as social media and word of mouth. Presenter trainings are held online for convenience of the trainees and each person is provided with the tools and materials needed to begin crafting their own story within the Ending The Silence presentation.

#### **Stories that resonate**

"I've been there. I at one point tried to commit suicide, I felt like I had no one to talk to. This was about 4 yrs. ago, I was arrested and taken to a 'special' hospital. Through counseling, family, and friends, I have moved forward. I greatly appreciate what you have done by going to different schools to enlighten people on a very miss understood topic. Thank you."

"Niki's story really inspired me to be a supportive friend. Everyone has problems and can get better. There is always a light at the end of the tunnel, no matter what the situation."

For more information on NAMI CA and any of their programs, visit <http://namicalifornia.org/> or contact Beth Larkins, Program Coordinator, at [beth.larkins@namicalifornia.org](mailto:beth.larkins@namicalifornia.org) and 916-567-0163, or Holly Davidson, Director of Programs at [holly.davidson@namicalifornia.org](mailto:holly.davidson@namicalifornia.org) and (916) 567-0163.