

Raising Mental Health Awareness In Cayuga County

Timothy Donovan, special to The Citizen



People walk in front of Memorial City Hall during the Timothy Durant Recovery Walk in 2016.

May has been recognized as Mental Health Awareness Month since it was first established by Mental Health America in 1949 with an aim to reduce stigma and encourage recovery. A national movement promoting mental health awareness began with the work of Clifford Beers, who had his own struggles with the disease.

This year, national and local organizations and agencies have events and educational outreaches scheduled for the month. For 2025, NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Health, has selected the theme: “In Every Story, There’s Strength,” celebrating the power of storytelling to fuel connection, understanding and hope for those navigating their own mental health path. This year’s theme for Mental Health America is “Turn Awareness into Action.”

Since 1949, research, government and private funding, and public support have led to the creation of mental health centers and other community-based support agencies. The National Institute of Mental Health, part of the National Institutes of Health, was founded to research mental health issues. In 1979, several support groups combined to form the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and in the 1990s, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration was founded to provide support services and education for people struggling with addiction and mental illness.

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a “state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”

Locally, in recent years, the Cayuga County Mental Health Task Force has partnered with the YMCA, Downtown Deli, Cayuga Counseling Services, the Cayuga County Community Mental Health Center, Auburn Housing Authority, Liberty Resources, local libraries (Seymour, Aurora and Port Byron), the Auburn Police Department, the Cayuga County Sheriff’s Office, the Auburn Fire Department and the Auburn Downtown Business Improvement District to come together as a community for the month of May to show a sign of solidarity in support of mental wellness.

As its chairman, I was honored to accept a proclamation from the Cayuga County Legislature to the Cayuga County Mental Health Subcommittee declaring May 2025 as Mental Health Awareness Month. In the proclamation, county Legislature Chairman Jonathan Anna wrote, “I also call upon the citizens, government agencies, public and private institutions, businesses and schools in Cayuga County to commit our community to increasing awareness and understanding of mental health.”

This year I purchased green ribbon mental health awareness lapel pins to give to both local public and nonprofit providers of mental health counseling and support services and programs as a token of my appreciation.

According to NAMI: One in five U.S. adults experiences mental illness each year, but fewer than half get treatment; one in six U.S. youth experience a mental health condition each year, but only half get treatment. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the number of adults reporting symptoms of anxiety tripled from 2019 to 2020, and symptoms of depression increased four times in adults in 2020 compared to 2019.

In 2024, the Cayuga County mental health system served more than 1,600 individuals through intake. Nationwide, accidental overdoses, including alcohol and over-the-counter and prescription medications, have increased by 56% since 2019, and suicides have more than doubled over the last two years. These developments demonstrate why support for mental health is needed more than ever.

The Cayuga County Mental Health Task Force of the Cayuga County Mental Health Subcommittee invites community members to participate in the following planned events and activities that acknowledge ongoing mental health struggles and promote mental wellness for all.

6 p.m. Tuesday, May 20: Tim Durant Recovery Walk, Exchange Street Mall (walk to Clymer Street, end at GRACE House). Presented by Auburn Drug and Alcohol Treatment Court, Auburn Behavioral Health Court, Cayuga County Felony Treatment Court, Unity House of Cayuga County, GRACE House and Nick’s Ride 4 Friends. Auburn Mayor Jimmy Giannettino will proclaim May 2025 as National Drug Treatment Court Month and Mental Health Month. For more information, call Marty at (315) 350-0869.

NAMI of Cayuga County will be distributing white mental health awareness bows around Auburn and participating in the Tim Durant Recovery Walk in recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month.

From noon to 2 p.m. Friday, May 30, will be Unity House's second annual Mental Health Awareness Month Walk, starting at the New York State Equal Rights Heritage Center, 25 South St. There will be art therapy, inspiring stories, free mental health community resources information and refreshments. The event is sponsored by Unity House's PROSperity Program, 146 North St., (315) 282-0241; and Nick's Ride 4 Friends, 13 Chapel St., (315) 253-3945.

These events follow an **open house at Cayuga Counseling Services** on May 7, as well as the Unity House day habilitation program's second annual Family Fun Day May 16. For more information, visit **cayugacounseling.org** or **unityhouse.org**.