

NAMI Offers Education, Support and Advocacy for Area Individuals and Families

In alignment with NQP DSRIP project 4.a.iii, (Strengthen Mental Health and Substance Abuse Infrastructure Across Systems), the Queens/Nassau chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) supports, educates and advocates for those with mental and behavioral health issues.

“NAMI - Queens/Nassau was founded almost 37 years ago in affiliation with Northwell Health’s Zucker Hillside Hospital,” says Janet Susin, president of the chapter’s board. “Over the years, our membership has grown, and today we are one of the largest NAMI affiliates in New York.”

Education and Support

To supplement its regular meetings and support groups, NAMI - Queens/Nassau has developed a range of programs to support individuals facing mental illness and educate the greater community.

For instance, the Friendship Network pairs individuals with mental illness to help them learn to develop and maintain friendships.

“It’s really quite a wonderful program,” Susin says. “Three years ago, we surveyed the 200 members of the program, and nearly 75 percent of respondents said they had formed a friendship because of their involvement.”

Similarly, the Family-to-Family program helps individuals and their families understand and adapt to mental illness. The program is comprised of 12 weekly 2½-hour classes that offer coping strategies and help family members empathize with loved ones.

“We host Family-to-Family groups at a number of community sites, including local churches and other community spaces,” Susin says. “In the past, these programs have even spun off into separate support groups.”

NAMI - Queens/Nassau also offers two educational programs tailored for different audiences. Breaking the Silence: Teaching the Next Generation About Mental Illness, designed for health teachers, is geared to upper elementary, middle and high school students and helps to address the often-missing component of mental health in curricula. These educational materials were developed in 1999 and include story-based lessons, posters and games and are used in classrooms throughout the United States and beyond.

Another program, “Let’s Talk Mental Illness,” is a 45-minute educational presentation that uses first-hand experience of mental illness to shift students’ perceptions. The program addresses the prevalence, symptoms and treatment of mental illness and provides an interactive look at the day-to-day life of a person with mental illness.

Advocacy

Much of the national, state and local advocacy work done by NAMI - Nassau/Queens involves securing appropriate funding for housing facilities, providing better access to medication, and reforming criminal justice policies.

“Recently, we partnered with other mental health agencies to advocate for appropriate funding for people who work in housing facilities,” Susin says, “and were successful in increasing their pay by 3.5 percent over two years.”

The group also hopes to improve access to medication so individuals can afford the medication that best suits their needs, not just their budget.

“When money alone dictates which medication an individual gets, it doesn’t save money in the long run, as these people are more likely to be hospitalized,” Susin says. “If you put someone on a medication that works for them, it saves the system in the long run.”

Criminal justice reform also frequently intersects with mental and behavioral health issues. NAMI – Nassau/Queens is working to secure proper funding for Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for police, ending solitary confinement for the mentally ill, and raising the age for juvenile incarceration to 17 in 2019 and 18 in 2020.