

Mental Illness Awareness Week



*Lebanon Daily News,
September 20, 2010*

In 1990, the United States Congress established the first week of October as

Mental Illness Awareness Week (MIAW) in recognition of the National Alliance on Mental Illness's (NAMI) efforts to raise mental illness awareness. Since 1990, mental health advocates across the country have joined together during the first full week of October to celebrate. (See www.nami.org for more details). NAMI is dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness. NAMI is America's largest grassroots organization dedicated to improving the lives of persons living with serious mental illness.

What is Mental Illness Week about? I believe it is about education and celebration. It is about educating the community on mental illness. Our community includes family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, our churches, health care providers, politicians, and anyone else who lives or works in Lebanon County. It is about celebrating our accomplishments in fighting mental health stigma, promoting recovery, transforming mental health services, and generally making life better for individuals with mental illness.

Education and support are vital elements in our work to improve the lives of individuals with mental illness and their families. Education helps us to reduce mental health stigma which can directly affect the quality of the lives of those individuals and their families. Education consists of learning

about mental illness and how it affects individuals, individuals and families gaining knowledge and skills for living successfully with mental illness, and learning from individuals with mental illness and their families what it is like to live with mental illness. Education is the key to unlocking and eliminating many of the myths about mental illness. My next column will begin a series on education about mental illness.

What is there to celebrate? The mental health service system has been in a process of transformation over the last fifty years or so. Lebanon County has been involved in this transformation. Below is my attempt to provide a list of the transformation that has taken place. This list is not all inclusive but I believe it gives you a good picture of what has occurred in Lebanon County.

1. The National Institute of Mental Health was organized in 1949. Today we have a system of county, state, and federal organizations overseeing the mental health system. Lebanon County Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Early Intervention Program is the county organization responsible for this oversight of the county system.
2. In the early 1950's Lebanon County had no psychiatrist, one psychologist in all of the school districts, emotionally disturbed people were detained in jail overnight because our local hospital would not admit them, mentally ill children were being hidden in attics, the closest mental hospital was both understaffed and overcrowded, and there was bitter opposition to the construction of a private mental hospital - Philhaven. Today, Lebanon County has a variety of psychiatrists and psychologists, emotionally disturbed individuals

are seen by Crisis Intervention both in the community and at the Good Samaritan Hospital emergency department, we have a variety of children and youth services to meet the needs of our children and their families, if treatment is needed, admission to a mental health service is expedited, and Philhaven provides a variety of behavioral health programs including inpatient, outpatient and residential programs.

3. The Pennsylvania Mental Health Procedures Act of 1966 established the Mental Health Program in Lebanon County and other counties throughout the Commonwealth.
4. Individuals with serious mental illness are no longer being "sentenced" to a lifelong term at the state hospital. Today, most individuals admitted to the state hospital are able to be discharged within two years of admission to the hospital.
5. Individuals with mental illness can access services beyond just medication management. The array of services available in Lebanon County includes housing support, vocational rehabilitation, psychotherapy, and social rehabilitation.
6. Individuals are being empowered to manage their illness and their services versus having someone tell them what they are going to do.
7. Recovery from mental illness is a reality for individuals with mental illness.
8. There is a variety of living arrangements available to individuals with mental illness including independent living.
9. Wellness Recovery Action Plans are helping individuals with mental illness to achieve their recovery goals.

10. The community has become a partner in the efforts to improve the lives of those individuals with mental illness and their families.

How do we celebrate these accomplishments? The MHA is sponsoring a movie night at the Allen Theater on Monday October 4, 2010 at 6:00 p.m. We are showing "The Soloist", a movie about a musician with mental illness who becomes homeless. This movie gives us a glimpse of what his life is like. There is no charge but we are asking for a donation.

NAMI affiliates throughout the United States are planning walks during the week. On October 2nd there will be a NAMI Walk in Harrisburg. See the NAMI website for more information on this walk.

Spend some time with an individual with mental illness, find out what her/his life is like, and ask her/him how they would like to celebrate.

The MHA will provide more information on events occurring during the Mental Illness Awareness Week as it becomes available. We will be at the CLA Fall Craft Festival on September 25, 2010 and we provide event information at our booth.

By Shem Heller, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of Lebanon County