

Trained volunteers are heart of NAMI Mercer Helpline

BY MADELINE MONHEIT AND ELISABETH HAGEN

If you dial the NAMI Mercer Helpline at (609) 799-8994, you *will not* reach a high-tech, automated answering system with a computer-generated voice or a distant call center operator robotically reading from an impersonal script.

At NAMI Mercer, you will talk to a trained volunteer who is in a unique position to offer support and empathy — someone who has experienced a mental disorder or has a family member affected by mental illness, someone who has “been there.”

When English Professor June Valley made a desperate call to the Helpline several years ago, the NAMI volunteer who answered the phone turned out to be June’s former student. For nearly thirty years, June’s son Galen had suffered from mania and depression, leading him to seek relief in drugs and alcohol.

June recalls the poignant moment when her former student shared a similar experience with her own children. “It was the awakening of my sensitivity to the freedom one feels without the awesome burden of stigma, a yoke that prevents us from realistically dealing with the crippling illness of our loved one. The NAMI volunteer strengthened my resolve and fortified me with new hope.”

June’s former student suggested that June enroll in NAMI’s Family-to-Family course. June found the classes to be a “gold mine” of theoretical and practical information. NAMI also linked Galen with local mental health resources. Now, with the right medication and counseling from the Association for Advancement of Mental Health, he is drug free, managing his bipolar disorder, and leading a productive life.

In 2008, the NAMI Mercer Helpline received 620 calls, the vast majority of them first-time contacts. Volunteers, who work in pairs, are available Monday through Friday from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. According to Executive Director Sally Osmer, NAMI Mercer has the capacity to handle a larger volume of calls.

“The questions people call about are often only the tip of the iceberg,” explains Ellen Heath, past president of the NAMI Board who formed the first formal Helpline team. Understandably, many people are reluctant to reveal painful private matters. “During our conversation, we ask ourselves about the kind of help this person really needs,” continues Ellen. “Maintaining confidentiality is extremely important.”

Helpline volunteers provide general information on illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression and their treatment; mental health issues affecting children, adolescents and young families; free NAMI education and support programs; and NAMI policy positions and advocacy opportunities.

The Helpline also makes referrals to community resources. “We are a conduit to agencies and government services,” explains Ellen. “We connect people to the help they need such as New Jersey Intensive Family Support Services (IFSS) for professional counseling. In 2008, NAMI Mercer referred 120 callers to IFSS.

Amy was the grateful beneficiary of Helpline referrals earlier this spring. She had recently moved to Mercer County when her son Jeff suffered a mental health crisis. Not knowing where

to turn, Amy received the same advice from Jeff Moore of the New Jersey Department of Mental Health and Jill Claudio of the Helene Fuld Crisis Center— CALL NAMI MERCER.

“In a few hours,” said Amy, “Sally Osmer put together an army of extraordinary, capable volunteers who understood Jeff’s problem because they have family members with mental disorders.” Amy’s family needed professional help in several fields. One volunteer was Ivy Minelly, a lawyer who assisted Amy’s son through the Division of Developmental Disabilities process.

Jeff is on new medication and now resides in a group home and has returned to school. The Helpline calls Amy every week to see how her family is doing. NAMI Mercer’s involvement does not end when the caller hangs up. “At the conclusion of a conversation,” explains Ellen, “we ask if the caller would like us to follow up. Volunteers keep track of their own callers in a personal way.”

The NAMI Mercer Helpline is not a professional counseling or physician referral service, although lists of area physicians are available. Volunteers may give information on medication, but no advice. In preparation for serving on the Helpline, volunteers must complete the Family-to-Family course and extensive one-on-one training.

To stay current, Helpline volunteers attend monthly meetings at which representatives from various agencies provide briefings. “We constantly update our reference book,” adds Ellen. This NAMI Mercer handbook covers local case management services, children’s resources, day programs, employment, housing, medication, Social Security benefits, suicide, and many other relevant topics.

NAMI Mercer recently developed a reference book to share with the public. Last spring, in partnership with the Mercer County Coordinating Council (CIACC), NAMI introduced the first comprehensive “Guide to Mental Health Services for Children and Adolescents in Mercer County”. Copies of the guide are available from the Capitol County Children’s Collaborative, 33535 Quakerbridge Road, Suite 800, Hamilton, NJ 08619, (609) 584-0888.

For most people, calling the Helpline was their first encounter with NAMI Mercer. Many go on to join the organization, make contributions, enroll in programs, and become volunteers themselves.

On the Helpline, June found a place “to apply [her] education and teaching experience to help others and to remove the stigma associated with mental disorders.” Lola, who discovered NAMI Mercer when trying to understand her sister’s mental illness, wanted to give back a little of the support NAMI had given her over the years.

In Lola’s words, “it is very satisfying to feel that I have eased someone’s pain just by listening, sharing my own experience, and letting them know that I truly understand what they are going through.”

For more information, visit www.namimercer.org, email home@namimercer.org, or call (609) 799-8994.