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National Alliance on Mental Illness

Mercer MESSENGER

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15th Annual NAMIWalks Is Coming on May 21

By Elizabeth Kepniss

NAMI Mercer Director of Development

NAMI Mercer is getting WILD about Mental Health for All as we prepare for the annual NAMIWalks Mercer County on Saturday, May 21, 2022. Walk Chairs Emily Antenucci and Stephanie Neumann are leading the way.

This year, we are hosting a hybrid event. Everyone is invited to walk in person with us at West Lake Park in Robbinsville from 1:00 and 4:00 pm or participate however, whenever, wherever, and with whomever. Just send us your pictures and/or post on social media using the hashtags #Together4MH, #WildAboutMH4All, and #NAMIMercer so we can all stay connected and show solidarity about improving mental wellness.

NAMIWalks Mercer is the largest mental health awareness-raising event in our area and our affiliate's biggest fundraiser. Since NAMI Mercer strives to remove cost as a barrier to participation, we offer all of our programs and services at no charge. Thus, we rely heavily on philanthropic giving and the revenue raised by our fundraising events.



The Matthew Family at the 2022 "Wild about Mental Health for All Kickoff" on March 19 at the Sawmill YMCA in Hamilton. From left to right: Adam, Sadie, Jack, and Marissa. Their team is Twenty-Two to Zero.

Your peer-to-peer donations are essential to supporting our services year-round.

Register online today at www.namiwalks.org/mercercounty. There is no fee to participate in the event. Better yet, sign up to become a team captain.

For help with registration or setting up your fundraising page, contact the Walk Manager at walk@namimercer.org or by calling 609-799-8994, ext. 13.

Join the herd and get ready to spread the word that you too are WILD About Mental Health for All!

Compelling Conversations: Trial Run in April

The NAMI Mercer Community Awareness Committee is excited to kick off a new program called Compelling Conversations.

Conducted as an event, Compelling Conversations will provide a forum to normalize conversations on mental health and reduce stigma. We will connect persons who have lived experiences with mental health challenges (called "communicators") with participants who will have an

opportunity to learn through open dialogue. These conversations will be personal and confidential.

We will launch Compelling Conversations this April with a beta test. Our initial participants are a psychology class at The College of New Jersey that will be able to engage in small-group conversations with communicators. We anticipate a full kick-off of Compelling Conversations in the fall.

Executive Director's Message

Engaging Corporate Partners

When nonprofits and corporations work together, they can deliver powerful outcomes for themselves and the communities they serve. Volunteerism, including skills-based volunteering, in-kind contributions, greater community visibility, and financial support are just a few of the key benefits such partnerships bring to a charitable organization.

In the last year, NAMI Mercer ramped up our corporate partnerships in a BIG way, and there are yet more exciting possibilities on the horizon. Following are a few examples of how joining forces with our corporate partners has allowed us to extend our reach and increase our impact.

VERIZON

In the fall of 2021, NAMI Mercer connected with a business operations manager from Verizon who invited us to make a presentation on workplace mental health. I had the distinct privilege of teaming up with Carol Kivler to present "A Journey of Resilience." As an extension of this initiative, Verizon employees penned "e-cards of caring" for frontline mental healthcare workers. These were subsequently transcribed onto notecards by NAMI Mercer volunteers and interns and delivered to 240+ nurses/counselors at Penn Medicine Princeton House Behavioral Health. We heard they were grateful for the recognition.

OTSUKA

As part of a #GivingTuesday volunteer initiative, NAMI Mercer's Julia Dare and Otsuka employees gathered both in-person and online to create more than 400 hygiene kits. Then, under the direction of Director of Operations Danita Saunders-Davis, NAMI Mercer delivered the kits to the patients at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital prior to the winter holidays. These kits included a blanket, toiletries, game/coloring books, and a note of encouragement. Many of the bags

were personalized with colorful artwork. We were told the patients felt very special when they received these gifts.

LAW SCHOOL ADMISSIONS COUNCIL

NAMI Mercer also had the unique opportunity to gain a little "national attention" when I was invited to be the guest interviewee for an online gathering of more than 1600 law school students/applicants from across the country, as well as staff from the Law School Admissions Council. The stimulating exchange focused on stress reduction related to high stakes testing and a variety of other mental health concerns. It created yet another valuable corporate connection.

PARTNERSHIPS ON THE HORIZON –

McCANN/IPG HEALTH AND JANSSEN

Looking ahead, we are preparing to launch WOW (Working on Wellness), an employee mental health support group, with our wonderful friends from McCann/IPG Health (see article on Page 5), and one of their talented teams is working *pro bono* on creating a new brochure for us.

Janssen recently notified us about changes they are making to their giving strategy and their desire to partner with us on initiatives that will effect real social change. The creative wheels are already turning as we re-imagine what that partnership might look like going forward.

There is energy and excitement in the air as we forge a path into a new era. We can be proud and grateful to be part of the vibrant community that is on this journey.



Janet Haag

Elizabeth Kepniss Joins NAMI Mercer Staff

A Warm Welcome to Liz

On Monday, February 7, Elizabeth (Liz) Kepniss joined NAMI Mercer as our new director of Development. She shares our passion for mission and is excited to put her talents to work for our community.

Liz comes to us with great experience, the highlight of which has been her past seven years as the first and only paid professional with GiGi's Playhouse (not to be mistaken for a theater group), a Down Syndrome achievement center



Elizabeth Kepniss

structured similarly to NAMI. During her tenure at GiGi's, Liz "did it all"—and she is looking forward to new challenges and opportunities with us.

Liz lives in Clinton Township, NJ and holds a BA degree in Communications and Public Relations from Rowan University. Welcome, Liz. Here's to a grand new adventure!

A Fond Farewell to Julia

Although Julia Dare served as our Director of Development for a limited time, she still made a big impact and we are deeply grateful to her. She received an attractive offer to shift gears in her career and become a market analyst for a brand-new company in Princeton. As Julia noted, it was a difficult decision but the right one for her growing family. We will miss her and wish her the best.

President's Message

Important 988 Legislation



Tom Pyle

Best wishes to one and all. My message this time is about important legislation pending in Trenton to provide funding and infrastructure in support of a new national mental health emergency call service number: 988.

Many of us remember the iconic movie music theme from *Ghostbusters*, the campy 1983 semi-sci-fi comedy with Bill Murray and Dan Ackroyd. Written and sung by Ray Parker, Jr., the tune is immediately recognized for its synthe-

sizer syncopation, wacky stanzas, and its risible interrogatory:

If you're seeing things
Running through your head
Who you gonna call?
Ghostbusters!

For family members navigating the maelstrom of mental illness, however, this whimsical diddy of the 80's actually bespeaks a frightful reality of the present. When a loved one is in a psychiatric crisis, posing a threat of harm to self or others, indeed who you gonna call?

The Federal Communications Commission has a new answer: 988, a universal number specifically for mental health emergencies! Two years ago, the FCC—working with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Veteran Affairs, and the North American Numbering Council—released a

report recommending the use of 988 as the 3-digit emergency number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The following year, the FCC adopted rules establishing the 988 number. Every state must now enact laws and prepare for the 988 system, which goes into effect nationwide on July 6, 2022.

A funding proposal in the Garden State for this initiative is now before the New Jersey Legislature as Senate Bill S311 and Assembly Bill A2036. The Core Behavioral Health Crisis Services System Bill would establish 24/7 crisis call centers, a mobile response system to dispatch trained mental health professionals to Jersey loved ones in need, and crisis stabilization programs. The new service would be funded through an additional tax on monthly mobile phone bills. Important to note in hyper-tax-conscious New Jersey, the tax money would be dedicated exclusively to this mental health services initiative.

Senator Joseph Vitale, D-Middlesex, is the bill's prime sponsor. In February, the NJ Senate Health Committee advanced the bill, which is to go before the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee very soon. On March 7, the NJ Assembly Health Committee voted to push A2036 forward.

Families in crisis already know too well the inadequacies of calling 911 for mental illness emergencies. This state legislation would fill gaps in our current state behavioral health crisis system. The legislation intends to keep loved ones in the community and out of hospitals and the criminal justice system by connecting and engaging them sooner and better with the behavioral health services they need.

This distinctive legislation is both important and immediate. NAMI Mercer families and friends should watch it closely and make their voices heard in Trenton.

Sample Letter to Your Legislators

Reach out to your local legislators! Tell them to support S311/A2036 when it comes up for a full vote in the Senate and Assembly. Go to the New Jersey Legislative Roster of Members (<https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/legislative-roster>) to locate your district and identify your representatives. Call and email them the following message:

My name is (your name) and I am an advocate with NAMI NJ. As (a person/family member of a person) with a mental health condition, I am calling to ask (Asm/Asw/Sen) to vote "yes" on S311/A2036.

Too often, a person in a mental health crisis ends up in the emergency room or involved in the criminal justice system. That's not acceptable, and this bill gives us an opportunity to change that. S311/A2036 will

create a mental health crisis response system to ensure that any person in New Jersey, no matter where they live, has access to crisis care when they need it most. By providing a mental health response to mental health crises, we will help families like mine and our broader community. It's time we give people the help they need, and this bill will make that possible.

Please vote yes on S311/A2036.

Working on NAMI's Helpline through the Pandemic

An Interview with NAMI Volunteer Bette Sorrento by Lauren Agoratus

Bette (pronounced bet tee) Sorrento has been a NAMI Mercer volunteer since 2013. She works on the Helpline on Wednesdays and Fridays.

1. What brought you to NAMI Mercer?

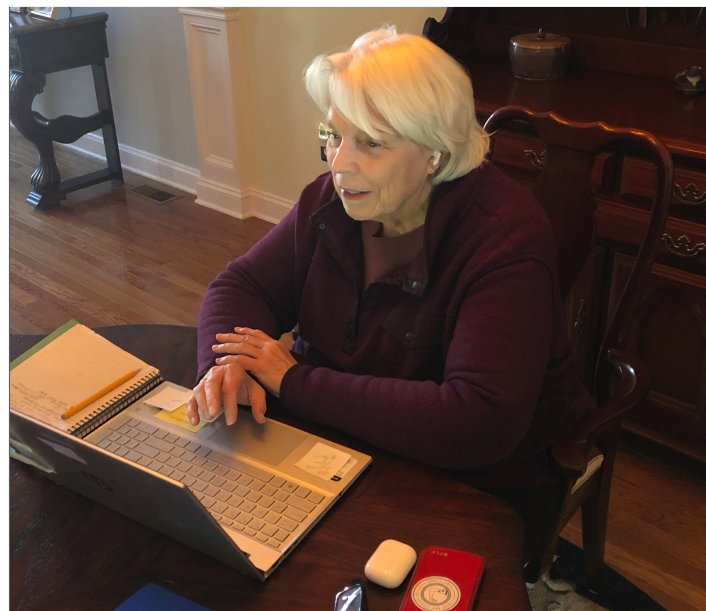
My partner started attending support groups and got me involved. He lives in Mercer, and I live in Ocean, so we just went together. I also have a connection to NAMI's mission because my mom had mental illness that was untreated. It's "by the grace of God" that I was minimally impacted. For me, the phrase "Walk the Walk" inspires me to express my empathy and compassion for others.

2. Why did you decide to be a volunteer?

I attended the volunteer orientation presented by Director of Operations Danita Saunders-Davis. Then I took the Connection Recovery Support Group facilitator training. Initially, I served as a volunteer facilitator. It was a good fit for me as a retired registered nurse to help others and myself on our journeys of mental health wellness. For me, as a volunteer, it's the ability to make a difference in people's lives, whether directly or indirectly, that is most important.

3. What are some of the things you do as a NAMI volunteer?

Volunteering has been a focus for my entire adult life. In 2016, NAMI Mercer posted the need for a Helpline assistant on Volunteer Match, and I like one-to-one interaction. NAMI provided the training and resources I needed. Whether on the phone or in person, we are helping individuals or families. The essence is supportive listening and determining firsthand what the caller needs from NAMI Mercer. The important thing is for us to have the tools and resources to direct people to help in the state or even across the country. We have Helpline meetings once a month with Danita and Janet and have had presentations from local healthcare providers such as Trenton Rescue Mission, Catholic Charities, and Hampton Behavioral Health to learn about their services.



Bette Sorrento working on the NAMI Mercer Helpline from her home office.

4. Please talk about the advantages of our Helpline volunteers' ability to work from home.

Volunteering virtually started during the pandemic in 2020 because there was no way to come into the office. There were three Helpline volunteers at the time, and we were able to use RingCentral to access all the technology that previously was available at the office. The nature of the calls we began receiving changed because people were isolated. The situation became more crisis-oriented and complex; resources for treatment were limited. Our ability to staff the Helpline and function productively was essential. In addition, virtual volunteering offers more flexibility.

I had surgery last year and was able to resume my volunteer role after a short hiatus. Working from home enables volunteers with transportation, family life or health challenges to contribute effectively. Even though the pandemic is waning, some of us continue to volunteer remotely.

Night OFF with NAMI

In 2021, recognizing that an in-person gathering was not feasible and that people were feeling "zoomed-out," NAMI Mercer opted to host a No-Gala Gala fundraiser. We simply welcomed our "guests" to make their contributions from the comfort of their own homes.

We are pleased to report that Night OFF with NAMI is a \$50,000 success story. Participants were invited to spin an online prize wheel for chances to win one of three very cool themed baskets. Following are the lucky winners: Claudia Link—Give My Regards to Broadway; Barbara Ziser—A Winter Evening with Friends; and Bill and Betty Wolfe—A Taste of Wine and Cheese. It is NAMI Mercer's good fortune



to benefit from such an amazing group of loyal friends and supporters. We thank you all for your generosity! Here's hoping that we can celebrate in person at Night Out with NAMI 2022.

Working on Wellness Support Group

By Karen Marquis

NAMI Mercer is preparing to launch a new community employee support group named “Working on Wellness” or WOW.

After two trying years of life during the COVID 19 pandemic, we all are eagerly anticipating the light at the end of the tunnel. But, will we really return to “normal?” The pandemic has taken a toll on many aspects of our lives, especially on the state of mental health in the workplace.

A recent survey conducted by Mind Share Partners (available at bit.ly/msp-2021-report) shows that mental health challenges at work are nearly universal. Moreover, productivity is suffering, and employees are increasingly leaving their positions due, in part, to their mental health. As a result, more companies are offering mental health resources. However, not all employers have the capacity to offer such assistance.

NAMI Mercer would like to help by launching a new support group with an emphasis on mental health in the workplace. The group will be facilitated by volunteers Carol

Kivler and Karen Marquis. Owner of Kivler Communications, Carol is a motivational speaker, international executive coach, training consultant, and author. Karen, retired after 20 years as director of the Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder drug discovery group at Pfizer, has extensive experience as a volunteer on the NAMI Mercer Helpline. Both Carol and Karen completed a workshop presented by Mind Share Partners to develop skills and a framework for a mental wellness initiative for the workplace. An outcome of their training was the proposal to offer a NAMI Mercer WOW support group.

Participants in a WOW group will meet twice a month to discuss various subjects relevant to mental health in the workplace. Topics include “Rising Above Negative Self-Talk,” “Keeping the Past in the Past,” “Coping with Reduced Energy and Endurance,” “To Reveal or Not Reveal,” “Feeling Inadequate,” and “Supporting Others.” The goal of the group will be to expand participants’ support systems, increase self-care skills, and decrease the stigma associated with talking about mental health in the workplace. Details on the group will be available soon.

SAVE THE DATE

Harvest of Hope Wellness Conference

Saturday, October 1, 2022

Featuring Ginger Zee, Chief Meteorologist, ABC News

Known to millions as the face of ABC News’ meteorology team, as well as for being a finalist on the 22nd season of “Dancing with the Stars,” Zee’s story goes far beyond the confines of television.

With the release of her second *New York Times* best-selling memoir “A Little Closer to Home,” which is a follow-up to “Natural Disaster: I Cover Them, I Am One,” Zee candidly brings readers along her immensely difficult mental health journey from anorexia and depression to the first female chief meteorologist at a network.



We Love Our Volunteers

NAMI Mercer staff and members of the Board of Directors expressed sincere appreciation to the 36 guests who attended our annual “We Love Our Volunteers” luncheon on Valentine’s Day, February 14.



Above left: Tom Pyle with Stephanie Kammer at the volunteer reception. Top right: Bill Foster and Michael Amter. Middle right: Beck Wong, Tom Pyle, Suzanne Ream and Janet Haag. Left: Lucretia Davis and Danita Saunders-Davis. Above: Juliet Dresdner and Maddy Monheit.

Our Finances Are Fine

By Courtney Davis

Chair, NAMI Mercer Finance Committee

NAMI Mercer began 2022 on firm economic ground following an extremely positive financial year in 2021. Through generous contributions from our community, including corporate, foundation, and individual donations as well as from state and county grants, we received approximately \$524,000 in income.

This significantly surpassed our budget projections for 2021 by nearly \$100,000. We are extremely grateful to all our supporters, both to recurring donors and those contributing for the first time. They rallied to support us during the pandemic. We could not do what we do without them.

“We are extremely grateful to all our supporters . . . we could not do what we do without them.”

In addition to increased revenue, our operating expenses were \$15,000 under budget. This was accomplished by adapting our programs and services to pandemic restrictions. Our preparedness to continue our operations and offer hybrid and virtual programs exemplifies the strength and flexibility of our organization.

Our increased revenue and lower expenses for 2021 re-

sulted in a net operating income of approximately \$112,000. We also ended the year with a strong cash balance of more than \$575,000, an increase in cash of about \$125,000 from 2020.

This allows us to go into the current year with a strong base fund to continue our operations. We hope to see this positive financial trend continue in 2022 and beyond!

NAMI Mercer

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NAMI Mercer NJ Programs & Services

Up-to-date information can be found on the NAMI Mercer website at nami-mercer.org. Program sliders on the homepage are hyperlinked to meeting platforms and/or registration.

The NAMI Mercer Helpline (a warm-line for compassionate listening, information, and resources). Call 609.799.8994 x17 or email help-line@namimercer.org.

Family Support Groups for caregivers of adults (over age 18), offered in partnership with IFSS (Intensive Family Support Services) of Oaks Integrated Care, are meeting on Mondays and Tuesdays, 5:15-6:45 pm via Zoom. The Mental Illness and Addiction Family Support Group is held once a month on the second Wednesday at 5:15 pm via Zoom.

The Parent Support Network for parents/caregivers of youth (under age 24), offered in partnership with the Youth Mental Health Project, is meeting in-person and online. Visit our webpage for the link to register for PSN Central NJ.

Family to Family, a multi-session course to educate and support caregivers, will be held in person at the NAMI Mercer Center, beginning April. 21. Registration is limited. Family and Friends, an abridged version, is offered periodically.

All NAMI Mercer support groups, workshops and classes are offered at no cost to participants. Registration is required for education classes Family to Family, Family & Friends, The Parent Support Network and the Weight ≠ Worth support groups.

The Connection Recovery Support Group for individuals living with mental health conditions is being held via video or audio conferencing on 1st and 3rd Mondays at 2 pm and 2nd and 4th Thursdays at 7 pm. Hybrid option to be launched soon.

The Hearing Voices Support Group is meeting in-person at the NAMI Mercer Center on the 2nd and 4th Mondays of each month, 1:00-2:00 pm. Confirmation of attendance must be called in by 10:00 am the day of the meeting.

Just Friends members are currently gathering for one in-person activity per month.

Weight ≠ Worth Support Group (age 16+) for those with an unhealthy preoccupation with food, weight, or appearance is being held online on the 2nd & 4th Wednesday of each month at 7:30 pm. Registration required.

Harvest of Hope is slated for Saturday, October 1, 2022. More information soon.

Community Education – Check the NAMI Mercer website for details or to request Ending the Silence, In Our Own Voice, or customized presentations.

THE NAMI CENTER of Mercer County

Whitehorse Executive Center
1235 Whitehorse Mercerville Rd.
Building C, Suite 303
Hamilton NJ 08619
609.799.8994
namimercer.org

Weight ≠ Worth Support Group

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that often become life-threatening. They can present as an unhealthy preoccupation with food, weight, or appearance. Anyone can be affected regardless of age, race, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Being part of a group that provides a safe space for sharing struggles and triumphs can be crucial to the healing process.

NAMI Mercer has launched a peer-

led **Weight ≠ Worth** Support Group, open to anyone age 16+. Two of our very talented interns, Madelyn McGee and Gillian Kee, will be facilitating.

Meetings will take place virtually on the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month. Everything discussed will remain confidential. This group is not intended to be an alternative to therapy but rather an additional form of support. New members are always welcome!

**The NAMI Center
of Mercer County**
1235 Whitehorse Mercerville Rd.
Bldg. C, Suite 303
Hamilton Township, NJ 08619
(609) 799-8994
<https://namimercer.org>



NON-PROFIT U.S.
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TRENTON NJ



Saturday, May 21, 2022

In-person: West Lake Park Robbinsville, NJ

1:00 - 4:00 PM

Register at
namiwalks.org/mercercounty.

Walking whenever/wherever
is an alternative to attending
the event on May 21.

WILD ABOUT

