

Celebrating Mental Illness Awareness Week: Reaching Multicultural Faith Communities

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I had an urgent call recently from a Latina, 75, whose grandson with schizoaffective disorder had stopped taking his psychotropic drugs. He was hostile, getting drunk, using and likely selling street drugs. A Crisis Intervention Team officer was taking him to the mental health crisis center. Carmen Ortiz, a NAMI member and head of the St. Brigid Catholic Church Support Group, had recommended she call me. This is an example of the type of crisis that may arise at any of the 15 churches with mental health ministries in Greater San Antonio. This is a good example of why NAMI needs to work with faith communities.

Recognizing the important role faith communities play in mental health support, for the past four years NAMI has worked with faith communities to help churches become not only welcoming and supportive but also a part of the services safety net. This faith-

based mental health initiative is a one-of-a-kind initiative in which a core volunteer team of mostly NAMI members assists churches in Bexar County with developing mental health ministries. NAMI San Antonio has hosted several clergy and laity ministry trainings. About 200 clergy and laity have participated in this faith-based mental health initiative.

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This year, as part of Mental Illness Awareness Week (Oct. 4-10, 2009), we are happy to have some of these faith leaders planning special observances to educate their congregations about mental illness. For example:

- Stanley Wilson, pastor of a Baptist African American and Latino church, plans to pray and speak from the pulpit about mental illness. “When medicine and faith come together, you have a holistic approach to treating mental illness,” said Pastor Wilson whose brother-in-law has schizophrenia. “God wants to bring people to healing and wholeness. He has a healing hand in there.”
- Teresa Barajas, a NAMI teacher and leader for the Holy Rosary Mental Health Support Group, plans a prayer



Yolanda

service for about 15 people at her home. Barajas' support group consists of mostly Spanish-speaking, low-income senior citizens. The group is interfaith, and though it started at Holy Rosary Catholic Church, it is a home-based ministry. She shares, "One member is a pastor with depression from a Protestant church. I ask him to lead us in prayer."

- María de la Garza, a Family-to-Family teacher and ministry leader at St. Benedict, plans a candle and prayer ceremony at a Mass. De la Garza, a licensed social worker and the mother of a person with mental illness, offers mostly mental health education.
- Mary May of St. Stephen plans a church-wide education and prayer event open to KEDA Spanish radio listeners. May has led a support group for the past three years. The group has excelled at integrating its 10-18 members into the congregation. "The Holly Spirit is there all the time," May said. "It's just another ministry, and the same people are part of the choir, Bible study, and overall family of the church," said Mary Garcia, a community member and advocate in May's group.

NAMI San Antonio leaders envision reducing stigma one church at a time. Activities during Mental Illness Awareness Week help us share NAMI's message of hope and support and to provide much needed mental health education to the community.



Mental Illness Awareness Week 2009

BUILDING COMMUNITY, TAKING ACTION
OCTOBER 4 - 10

In 1990, the U.S. Congress established the first week of October as "Mental Illness Awareness Week" (MIAW). Since then, NAMI state offices and affiliates have organized a great variety of events to educate communities about mental illness. We invite you to contact your local NAMI and to participate in these community events!

Are you looking for tools and resources to engage the Latino Community?
Visit www.nam.org/multicultural and www.nami.org/espanol to access a wealth of user-friendly guides and materials you can use.