

Mental Health Association kicks off new Advocacy Network

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A new Advocacy Network designed to provide a guide and voice for local consumers of mental health programs officially kicked off this month.

“It is our hope that our Advocacy Network will encompass strong groups of passionate individuals championing causes and issues close to their hearts,” said Pamela Bailor, chief executive officer for the Mental Health Association in Fayette County, which is providing administrative services and a home to the network.

The kickoff took place earlier this month in the Oak House drop-in center at the Mental Health Association, located in the Fayette County Health Center on New Salem Road in South Union Township, where health and social workers were invited to enjoy lunch and learn about this new network.

The Advocacy Network currently includes member groups who send representatives to a board of directors as well as a newly launched website for the Mental Health Association (www.mhafayette.org) and a phone number (724-438-6738) to provide information to consumers.

The idea is to make it easier for consumers, who sometimes struggle to find information and services while adjusting to a diagnosis.

“Many times, we forget a diagnosis is life changing,” said Bailor. “Everything changes. The individual, the family, coworkers, friends, neighbors. The person’s life is forever changed. Their future is changed. Their dreams are put on hold. The diagnosis changes everything. It takes priority.”

The Advocacy Network has been three years in the making, said Lisa Ferris, chief executive



Advocacy Network Kick-off

Rebecca Devereaux | Herald-Standard
Pamela Bailor, chief executive officer at the Mental Health Association in Fayette County, gives some insight into the newly established Advocacy Network during its launch recently in the Fayette County Health Center. The Advocacy Network consists of partners such as Partners For Recovery, NAMI, Youth M.O.V.E. and Suicide Survivor Support Group.

officer for Fayette County Behavioral Health Administration.

Ferris explained while the administration previously handled advocacy issues, she said, “We wanted it to be consumer driven.”

When putting the network together, Fayette County Behavioral Health Administration received a grant for \$19,000 from Staunton Farm Foundation in western Pennsylvania that paid for consultants to facilitate various meetings and forums throughout the county to identify the best models for the local area.

After much consideration, it was decided to place the network within the Mental Health Association, a subcontractor to FCBHA, which could offer a central location and administrative services.

“We’re happy that Pam and her staff embraced the concept,” said Ferris.

The Advocacy Network is starting with four local groups: Partners For Recovery, Suicide Bereavement Support Group, National Alliance on Mental Illness and Youth M.O.V.E (Motivating Others through Voices of Experience). Officials would like to add more in the future.

“We are hoping to gain strong advocates for a variety of issues,” said Bailor. “Strong advocacy efforts help form and shape the types of services that are being delivered. But, more importantly, strong advocacy groups can empower change in individual lives. As our network grows, so will the voices of individuals living with issues resulting from a diagnosed mental illness, a developmental disability or drug and alcohol issues.”

The kickoff featured remarks by local residents who are involved with Mental Health Association programs, including Jessica Moody, a parent advocate for MHA; Dustin Murray, who participates in Partners for Recovery and is also an MHA employee; Karen Drake, another MHA employee who has attended programs for years; and Roxanne Johnson, a family advocate for System of Care.

Moody and Johnson both spoke about having a son with autism issues.

Johnson commented, “Until you need mental health, you don’t know it’s out there.”

When her adopted son was diagnosed, Johnson was advised to look at the phone book to find help. She talked about being confused when attending meetings on behalf of her son’s care.

“There are so many things people in the mental health field assume you know and so many things you don’t know,” Johnson said.

Moody said when her son was diagnosed, neither she nor her husband had the skills to help him. They learned but also came to be aware that “not every family has the same experience.”

As a parent advocate, Moody commented, “I want parents to realize they have a voice.”

The kickoff also included a look at the new Mental Health Association website, which contains information on the Advocacy Network and its partner organizations.

The website has a link to videos by Youth M.O.V.E that feature youths and young adults talking about subjects such as unhealthy relationships, growing up without a father, suicide and being abused. Videos were also shown at the presentation.

“It is by experiencing issues first hand that we can support others going through the same experiences. Support groups work if there is a commonality among participants,” Bailor said. “Treatment works if you participate and seek answers. Grassroots advocacy efforts work if we stick together.”