

NAMI Maryland

POSITION PAPER: STIGMA

ISSUE: This paper will present the position of NAMI MD on the devastating effect that stigma has on individuals with mental illness and their families and will address ways to combat stigma

***BACKGROUND:** The modern definition of stigma is a mark of discredit or disgrace According to the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health: Final Report (2003): Stigma refers to a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, reject, avoid, and discriminate against people with mental illnesses....Stigma leads others to avoid living, socializing, or working with, renting to, or employing people with mental disorders — especially severe disorders, such as schizophrenia. It leads to low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness. It deters the public from seeking and wanting to pay for care. Responding to stigma, people with mental health problems internalize public attitudes and become so embarrassed or ashamed that they often conceal symptoms and fail to seek treatment. They often have increased difficulty in building connections in the community.*

Stigma also discourages the families of children and adolescents with serious emotional disorders from seeking treatment. These children, according to a report of the Surgeon General, may be scarred for life.

The long term impact of stigma is a poor prognosis for recovery among those individuals who delay treatment due to shame and secrecy.. A greater understanding of the roots of the illness, a non-judgmental and accepting approach to individuals with mental illness and their families, will help individuals receive the services necessary to recover and become functioning members of society.

National Alliance on Mental Illness Maryland supports the following positions and recommendations:

- Educate the community, family members and friends about the nature of brain disorders to minimize the fear and discrimination that persons with mental illness experience at work, in the neighborhood, in society in general, in the courts systems, in attempts to gain housing, or a new job, and in insurance coverage.
- Help individuals with mental illness to overcome shame and fear by providing them with psychoeducation
- Use community resources and other options to help resolve, with dignity and respect, the dilemmas faced by those whose thought processes are slowed or skewed by their mental illness.
- Create policies that support early diagnosis and treatment in order to lessen the pain and suffering, and to improve the prognosis for recovery from the illness as well as from the stigma.
- Encourage persons with mental illness through compassionate and sensitive support to accept treatment (prescribed medicines and therapy) in spite of the perceived stigma.
- Encourage services and places of employment to exercise fair, equitable and nondiscriminatory hiring of individuals with mental illness and to support their special needs for therapeutic services.
- Require that the criminal justice system to provide effective screening, treatment and safe housing for those troubled individuals who are confronting a brain disorder.

- Individuals working in the criminal justice system should be educated about the nature of mental illness and the needs of individuals suffering from mental illness.
- Community housing organizations, and their policies, must promote affordable and adequate living places for those afflicted with mental illness.
- Health insurance policies must have parity between mental health provisions and somatic health provisions; those provisions must give fair and equal treatment to the mentally ill, such as ample deductions for prescription drugs, unlimited outpatient treatment and adequate coverage for lengthy hospital stays.

Approved by the NAMI Maryland Board of Directors on March 8, 2008.