

Ten Ways to Engage People Affected by Mental Illness in Your Community

INDIVIDUALS LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESSES and their family members should play a key role on your county planning teams and in your collaborative efforts to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails. They can be strong allies in building goodwill with the broader community, getting positive media attention for your efforts, and advising on strategies that work for advancing mental health recovery. They also can assist in training criminal justice professionals, providing peer support to individuals and families in crisis, and identifying the impact your Stepping Up work is having.

Although each county or community has its distinct needs and challenges, county leaders and partners can broadly engage individuals or family members in this initiative by taking the following steps:

- 1. Identify local mental health organizations** that provide some combination of support, education, and advocacy for people affected by mental illness (e.g., local chapters of the National Alliance on Mental Illness or NAMI) and co-occurring substance use disorders.¹ Cataloging these organizations can help you direct individuals to self-help groups that can provide an important adjunct to treatment. Join the mailing lists of local mental health and substance use recovery organizations and attend a meeting to establish a connection.
- 2. Share information about your efforts** related to Stepping Up and ask the organizations to spread the word. Engage local groups in bringing media attention to positive changes in your community.
- 3. Invite a representative** of the organization to participate on your county team.
- 4. Build on existing criminal justice programs** spearheaded by the organization or its partners, such as crisis intervention team (CIT) programs. These programs often have a steering committee that includes many of the key stakeholders in your community interested in criminal justice and mental health issues.
- 5. Ask local organizations about education and training** programs that they offer, including the following:
 - Education and support programs for individuals with mental illnesses and their families, which could be offered in conjunction with jail diversion programs, specialty courts, or reentry programs
 - Mental health awareness training for criminal justice and mental health professionals
 - Public awareness presentations that include the individual perspective on mental illness, as well as identifying an individual who has been trained to present at legislative briefings or press conferences

6. **Designate a county staff member** to serve as the point of contact with mental health organizations and other community partners. This can ensure that individuals and family members know who to contact with concerns and encourages feedback on policies, resources, or outcomes related to new programs.
7. **Encourage service providers and case managers** implementing the county plan to engage people with mental illnesses and their family caregivers directly in coordinating treatment plans, whenever possible. Encourage providers to establish information-sharing protocols consistent with HIPAA standards that promote family members' and other caregivers' access to information that is directly relevant to the person's care. Support the use of evidence-based practices that empower individuals to direct their recovery, including
 - Wellness Recovery Action Plans (WRAP), which can be a critical component to comprehensive treatment plans;
 - The use of advance directives to allow an individual to manage future crises; and
 - Shared decision making, which is a hallmark of recovery-oriented practice.
8. **Involve certified peer specialists** in efforts to connect individuals in crisis to services and to help them navigate the mental health system.
9. **Work with individuals with mental illnesses** and their families to promote an awareness of how mental health parity is playing out in your community.² This will help ensure the law is being carried out properly to increase access to services.
10. **Invite the mental health organization to partner** with you in hosting an awards ceremony honoring criminal justice and mental health professionals who provide outstanding services to people living with mental illness.

ENDNOTES

1. NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots organization representing individuals and families directly affected by mental illness. NAMI has organizations in every state and 950 communities nationwide. To find your local NAMI, visit nami.org/local. Other mental health organizations you may wish to reach out to include the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery, and Mental Health America. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration also has a [mental health consumer assistance listing](#) of mental health and substance use recovery organizations.
2. The [Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act](#) requires that health insurers and group health plans provide the same level of benefits for mental health and substance use treatment and services that they do for medical care.

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