

Panel Discussion: Community Collaborators and Resources

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

In our vibrant urban community, many agencies that don't have the words "mental illness" in their names still provide relevant and significant services to both families and consumers. Sometimes NAMI East Bay learns about them from others or through sharing spaces at health fairs or the Solano Stroll. With that in mind, our January 27 meeting invited representatives from different community resources to give short presentations and answer questions. Among the presenters were:

- **Benjamin Blake**, Chief Program Officer, and **Jovan Yglecias**, Director of Programs, from Bay Area Community Services (BACS).
- **Jenny Zegarra**, Bilingual Spanish Registry Coordinator, from Public Authority for In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS).
- **Robin Earth**, Information and Referral Specialist, from Center for Independent Living, Inc. (CIL).
- **Sarah**, a member of Al-Anon, a group for families and friends of alcoholics and drug users.
- **Liz Rebensdorf**, NAMI East Bay President and a board member for Mental Health Association of Alameda County (MHAAC).



FROM LEFT: BENJAMIN BLAKE, JOVAN YGLECIAS, JENNY ZEGARRA, AND ROBIN EARTH

Bay Area Community Services

BACS is a heritage agency in Oakland and Alameda County going back to 1953 and offering Wellness Co-op services since 1969. The agency runs a variety of programs in the “continuum of ease,” including crisis care at Woodrow House in Hayward, offering short-term housing to help people with severe mental illness avoid hospitalization; case management programs at various sites; and Wellness Centers in Oakland, Hayward, Fremont, and Pleasanton. They generally serve adults 18 years and up, although BACS does have a transition-age youth program at Towne House in Oakland.

The Wellness Centers offer groups and activities, Blake said, including classes in cooking, shopping, budgeting, art, and music. There’s even a drum circle. “These activities are directed by the people who participate and share similar experiences,” he said. The centers do not offer day treatment, although BACS runs an adult day program, Aging with Independence, in Oakland and Fremont for elders with memory disorders.

The Wellness Centers are open 8:30 to 6:30 every day, including Saturdays and holidays. The difference between BACS’s Wellness Co-op model and the clubhouse model offered by other agencies is that the Wellness Centers require no referral. The consumer just walks in the door.

And BACS has a “No Wrong Door” policy, Yglecias said. Anyone, whether a county resident or not, can come into one of the Wellness Centers and be served. If a person needs psychiatric help, he or she can make an appointment with one of the psychiatrists who visit the centers several days a week. From there, individuals can be directed toward the programs they need. “You get out what you put in,” he said.

New programs in Alameda County, according to Yglecias, include help for people to obtain benefits and help for inmates coming into the community under the provisions of Assembly Bill 109, which meets the Supreme Court’s requirement to reduce prison populations in California. BACS is also opening new programs in Solano County for case management and jail avoidance.

Contact BACS at <http://www.bayareacs.org>.

In-Home Support Services

IHSS is a county-administered program that pays homecare workers to provide personal care for a person with a disability, including administering medications to someone with severe mental illness, and to do household tasks such as shopping, cooking, and cleaning so that the person can remain safely in his or her home. To be eligible, recipients need to be on Medi-Cal or Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

For families with a mentally ill consumer, the program offers relief of personal care duties so that a parent or guardian can work outside the home. The IHSS program will provide a worker—which the family can select and approve—to match the family’s needs. The program will also pay a family member \$11.50 per hour plus benefits to provide their own care instead of bringing in outside help.

“The program is designed to help people with mental health or physical disabilities stay in their home and avoid having to live in a facility,” Zegarra said. IHSS also offers classes to train family members as care providers.

The registry process includes a home visit from a social worker to establish the types and hours of service needed, a form for your doctor to complete certifying the need, and a Notice of Action from the county to signify approval.

For more information, see <http://ac-pa4ihss.org> or call (510) 577-3552.

Center for Independent Living

CIL was started in 1972 near UC Berkeley to integrate people with disabilities into the community. It now provides support and resources so that people with physical or mental disabilities can live as independently as possible and not be dependent on nursing homes or family members.

“We operate on a peer level,” Earth said. “We are not case management, and we don’t tell you what you should do or push you to do anything you don’t want.” CIL’s core services are to offer information referral for people who are stuck because they don’t know their options. “We work along with people but not *for* people.”

The Bay Area is in an affordable housing crisis, she said. CIL can suggest places people look to find affordable housing that is also accessible, whether for people with mobility problems, or because they need service or emotional-support animals, or have chemical or other sensitivities. But she cautions that the search may take some time and that waiting lists are long.

Specialists at CIL can help individuals establish their independent living goals and the steps required to work toward them, such as gaining employment, acquiring a bank account, learning how to organize yourself or your finances, or perhaps learning how to navigate the public transit system. The center offers classes on many of these survival skills. The goal is deinstitutionalization and getting people back into the community.

Contact <http://www.cilberkeley.org>.

Al-Anon

As a member of Al-Anon for more than five years, “Sarah”—who did not use her last name for reasons of anonymity—described her own story. In living with an alcoholic, addict, or someone with severe mental illness, she said, so much depends on your own attitude.

Many family members with an ill loved one try to be “fixers,” rescuers, taking care of everyone, and then harming themselves for the sake of the people they love. This can lead to codependency—a dysfunctional state where one actually supports the other person’s disability. “You’re part of the dance,” Sarah said. “You have to figure out where you are.”

Although designated for families of alcoholics, Al-Anon provides relief to many people in families dealing with severe mental illness.

Contact <https://www.ncwsa.org/d26/> for the Al-Anon Family Groups in the East Bay.

Mental Health Association

MHAAC has been serving people with mental illness and their families since 1958. It provides direct assistance to consumers and family members through programs like Prevention and Recovery in Early Psychosis (PREP), which assists

young people experiencing their first psychotic break, and it runs the Family Education and Resource Center (FERC), which provides information, education, and support services to family members.

The agency also runs advocacy programs that:

- Support families and caregivers who have a relative being served at John George Psychiatric Pavilion or in the criminal justice system.
- Provide assistance to people with mental illness trying to secure benefits such as Medi-Cal, SSI, and General Assistance.
- Represent involuntarily held patients at capacity and certification review hearings.
- Respond to patients' questions and complaints at psychiatric hospitals and facilities, including halfway houses and board-and-care homes.

MHAAC is also active in public educations and policy advocacy, such as the campaign to pass Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act.

Contact <http://mhaac.org>.