

## Alameda County's Family Education and Resource Center

*Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas*

Funded with money from the California Mental Health Services Act (Proposition 63, passed in November 2004), the Family Education and Resource Center (FERC) is a brand-new entity in Alameda County—and in the state as well. The center was conceived, developed and is now being implemented with local family involvement and participation. Indeed, it is staffed by family members. At our May 26 meeting, we heard from **Karina Foote**, FERC Program Director, and **Annie Kim**, one of the family advocates who serves Oakland, Berkeley, Albany, and Piedmont. They and the other staff members have worked hard to make this conception a reality.

The Family Education Resource Center ([www.askferc.org](http://www.askferc.org)) is administered as part of the Mental Health Association of Alameda County (MHA). FERC's goal is to provide a one-stop shop offering information, education, hope, and support to family members and caregivers of people with serious emotional disturbances and mental illness in the county.

FERC's main office is at the Eastmont Town Center at 7200 Bancroft Avenue, Suite 269, Oakland, CA 94605.

They have other offices and staff members in Fremont, Hayward, and at the MHA offices, and are working on an office in Livermore. They maintain a "warm line" (i.e., not a crisis hot line but a line to call to reach someone for support) at 1-888-896-3372. They can also be reached at [info@askferc.org](mailto:info@askferc.org).

"We maintain a robust library," Foote said. "We have the latest books on psychiatry and mental health. They're so recent that graduate students often come by to do research with us. We also have computers that family members can use to access the internet and phones for local calls. We work to make sure that our referrals are current and accurate."

The group is planned for a staff of ten and currently has eight people, all of whom have personal experience as family members and caregivers. "So we can truly say we've been there, we can help," Foote said. "We help families with a loved one of any age, including children and adolescents, transition age youth, adults and seniors." They provide services in a culturally competent manner, reaching out to people of all ethnicities. In addition to basic information and referrals, the staff can provide patient advocacy, support on benefit rights, and



*FAMILY ADVOCATE ANNIE KIM (LEFT) AND  
FERC PROGRAM DIRECTOR KARINA FOOTE*

specialized help for families with a loved one at the John George Pavilion in San Leandro or in the criminal justice system. All of the group's services are free to family members.

"When someone calls," Kim said, "it's often in a crisis. They usually have been passed from phone number to phone number and they're very frustrated. One of the things we ask is, 'How are *you* doing?' They haven't heard that before, and it tells them they are not alone."

The organization works with service providers and encourages their interaction with family members. "Sometimes the provider may view the family, especially if they're in crisis or post-traumatic, as an additional client to add to their load," Foote said. "But while the family is not trouble, they can often be confused and overwhelmed. Our advocates can work with them to help communicate to the provider what their loved one is experiencing."

"In addition to offering the most accurate referrals," Kim said, "we will often make some of the calls and let the family member—who is usually a working adult—get some rest. The family advocate takes a brief history, gets the appropriate information, and can narrow the list of numbers and options to be tried.

"We can also educate the family and friends on the nature of the illness, the symptoms, what's driving the behavior, and help them differentiate the illness from the person. We can help them know how to support their loved one."

"We had one family," Foote added, "that was able to bring in their son's friends. They were willing to offer support and networking to make his situation easier by arranging guitar lessons, driving him places, and so on. They also learned how to respond when he became agitated."

Karina Foote and Annie Kim then opened the talk to questions.

**Q. What kind of help can you give on housing?**

A. Housing remains the biggest problem for people with mental illness. We can determine the level of service needed—single room occupancy, dual diagnosis, board and care—and help them find a licensed facility that fits within the costs that the family can support. We don't make recommendations but supply options and try to narrow the list. We work closely with Robert Ratner, Housing Services Director at Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services.

**Q. What should people ask about when looking for housing?**

A. Ask about the number of residents and number of caretakers. Is the facility locked or can residents come and go? Does it offer activities like outings and things to do with other residents? How often are the clients fed and what is served? Can you visit and talk with other residents? Going on a visit is often depressing, but you can tell more with your own eyes than talking over the phone.

There are always people who can make the calls and find housing for you, but it will usually cost a lot. Think through your criteria—what you will bend on, what you won't. Consider your deadline and what you can afford.

**Q. What databases do you have?**

A. When people call the warm line, the operator enters as much information into our family database as they are willing to offer. We ask about the level of confidentiality and anonymity, including whether the caller is willing to give his or her name. This database gives us background information that all the

advocates can work with, and they record the thread of contacts with the family chronologically. We maintain this information on highly secure servers to protect the person's identity.

We also maintain resource databases of providers of services like housing.

**Q. Can the families come into your offices?**

A. We take walk-ins, drop-ins and appointments. We're open nine to five, and we're working on finding volunteers to operate the warm line, with access to our databases, outside those hours.

**Q. Can FERC help if you have a relative outside Alameda County or from outside the state?**

A. We can find support for you in those situations, but we can usually spend more time with you if you need help inside the county.

**Q. Do you work with Berkeley Mental Health?**

A. Our contact is limited, but we do have an agreement with the family advocate in Berkeley. We'll back each other up on vacations, and she can take over contacts for families who live in Berkeley.

**Q. Do all of your advocates go to support groups?**

A. We go to groups in order to find out what people need and so we can play a role. The creation of FERC was the result of hundreds of voices telling what families need.

**Q. Do you do any hands-on work with special education?**

A. We work with the Oakland School District on individual education plans. We are working on a 12-hour training program to help teachers and others identify mental health issues early and to distinguish symptoms from simple "acting out." We are also in contact with the University of California at San Francisco to identify 60 families to participate in a study of early-onset psychotic breaks.

**Q. How many families do you serve?**

A. Last year, from our opening in September through the end of the year, we served about 300 families. We've served hundreds of families so far this year, and we're still growing. Since we're a new kind of service, we have been using public service announcements telling about the kind of support we can offer. "Are you caring for a loved one with mental illness? Talk to someone who knows what you're going through."

**Q. How are you faring with the current budget cuts?**

A. The Mental Health Services Act funding is ironclad, but the county is cutting about \$40 million in other funding for mental health. So we're learning to combine services and be more efficient. Families are still a priority in the county. When you take away the other systems, family is all that's left.