

FERC at Five Years

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

The Family Education and Resource Center (FERC) is an innovative program that supports families and caregivers of people of any age with serious emotional or mental health challenges living in Alameda County. Since opening its doors in September 2009, the center has served nearly 11,000 families. At our March 25 meeting, FERC Director **Annie Kim** and Lead Family Advocate **Bettye Foster** shared what they have learned in the past five years. Their activities include advocating for the family's and caregiver's role and inclusion with providers, advising families about what they should do during a crisis, and stressing the often overlooked importance of practicing self-care. Conceived and put into being by Alameda County family groups with funds from the Mental Health Services Act (Proposition 63), FERC is unique in both California and the nation.

"All of our family advocates are also family members who have a person with mental health issues," Foster said. "So we've been there ... we can help."

Kim stressed that FERC helps anyone concerned about someone, including that person's parents, siblings, spouse or partner, friends and neighbors, colleagues and roommates. Family advocates often help people who live outside the county, the state, and even outside the country. Although their expertise is in Alameda County programs and services, they don't like to say they can't help and will try to put a caller in touch with local services as necessary.

Foster said that a first-time connection on the FERC "warm line" (1-888-896-3372) may run from fifteen minutes to two hours, and the first in-person meeting may take at least thirty minutes to an hour. The center has three family advocates (FAs) at its main office at the Eastmont Town Center in East Oakland, and one each at the offices in San Leandro, Fremont, and Livermore, but all the FAs rotate into the main office once a week. They are prepared to provide services and training in English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Farsi. And all services are provided free of charge.

In addition to information and education topics like types of illnesses, diagnoses, and medications, which can be useful anywhere, the center provides advocacy and support services, going with the family member to the hospital, to meetings with service providers, to hearings and court dates in the criminal justice system, and meetings with teachers and school officials. They connect clients with available and appropriate services. "And this is not just a list of phone numbers," Kim said. "Too often those put you in a dead end or voice mail for a callback that



*FERC DIRECTOR ANNIE KIM (LEFT)
AND LEAD FAMILY ADVOCATE
BETTYE FOSTER*

never comes. We make the ‘warm connection’ ahead of time with the person who can actually help.” FERC also assists clients with navigating the behavioral health care system in Alameda County.

The FERC offices are busy. In February 2015 alone—“And December through February are usually our lightest months,” Kim said—the center handled 93 warm-line calls, 92 walk-ins by new clients and 52 walk-ins by old clients, took 50 in-person appointments, conducted 315 phone interactions, and dealt with 112 new clients and 139 returning clients.

Over the years, FERC has expanded the role of its family advocates. New skills include helping to prepare Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) with a loved one’s school, connecting clients outside of Alameda County with resources, and becoming a referral for 2-1-1 and ACCESS human services calls, other service providers and clinicians, law enforcement, and schools.

Family advocates also take continuing education courses in the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and confidentiality issues, children’s care, eating disorders, hoarding and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), housing options, medications, dual diagnosis, and suicide prevention, especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender loved ones.

The center at various times has offered support groups in English and Spanish and a group for transition-age youth (TAY) and their family members as well as groups for adults. Family advocates are certified to facilitate NAMI’s Family-to-Family classes and support groups in English and Spanish, as well as the Ending the Silence program with TAY family members in high schools. They also facilitate Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) classes for family members and at high schools, as well as the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) program.

FERC provides training programs for service providers, with input from local expert [Rebecca Woolis, MFT](#); crisis intervention training for law enforcement officers and police dispatchers; and 5150¹ training for caregivers, family members, and providers. The center runs an open roundtable with TAY consumers, family members and law enforcement; a public education campaign for future mental health providers; and training in Individualized Placement & Support (IPS). The latter is important, Kim said, “because employment is empowerment.”

For all these services and programs, Dartmouth College this May will present FERC with a National Family Award.

In regard to the 5150 and police dispatcher training, Kim pointed out several things that most people don’t know:

- If you call 9-1-1 on a cell phone, you are routed to the California Highway Patrol, not the nearest local police and fire services. It’s best to call from a landline, and put emergency numbers for local services in your cell phone’s contact list.
- When you call 9-1-1, you are actually talking to two people at once. One is the call taker, who is tasked with asking specific questions based on the type of

¹ Section of the California Welfare and Institutions Code that authorizes a qualified officer or clinician to involuntarily confine a person suspected of having a mental disorder that makes him or her a danger to self or others and/or gravely disabled.

emergency. The other is the local police dispatcher, who does not talk but enters responses into the police computer and performs triage in order to dispatch an appropriate response.

- Always allow the call taker to ask the necessary questions, as this will speed—not delay—the response time. Be prepared to answer the “5 Ws” of who, what, where, when ... and is there a weapon available to the person in crisis?
- Do not exaggerate the situation, as this will not improve your experience with police.
- If possible, try to meet the police officer outside, or away from the loved one in crisis.
- Be brief and direct in describing the situation.
- Allow the officers to assess the situation. Their priority will be to secure the scene and provide for everyone’s safety.
- Be prepared with a filled out copy of the [AB 1424 Form](#), which provides historical information about your loved one’s condition. “This is an excellent tool for family members,” Foster said.

Alameda County also offers two types of mobile mental health support:

- **Mobile Crisis Team** is for when the situation is urgent but not suitable for an emergency room visit. It provides two clinicians who have police radios, wear plain clothing, and drive a county vehicle. This service is available Monday to Friday, 10:30 am to 8 pm, at 510-383-5020. A similar service is available in Berkeley at 510-981-5244.
- **Mobile Evaluation Team** is a new program on a trial basis, pairing a police officer with a clinician, for when the situation is an emergency and safety is compromised. The pair travel in an unmarked Oakland Police Department vehicle. The service is available Monday to Thursday, 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, by calling 9-1-1 in Oakland (the Oakland Police Department’s dispatch number).

“Ideally,” Kim said, “a loved one should get voluntary support before a crisis erupts and the police are called, because ambulance and hospital services are expensive.” The FERC team is following programs that offer peer support, such as [Second Story Respite House](#) in Santa Cruz, which offers programs in a homelike setting.

An important part of FERC’s assistance is urging family members and caregivers to practice self-care. “Sometimes you just have to do something fun for yourself,” Foster said. “Take time for a cup of tea, read, take a walk, or practice a hobby.”

FERC’s offices are located at:

- **East Oakland Main Office:** Eastmont Town Center, 7200 Bancroft Avenue, Suite 269, 510-746-1700.
- **San Leandro:** 525 Estudillo Avenue, 510-895-8710. This office has a Spanish-speaking family advocate.
- **Fremont:** 39155 Liberty Street, Suite D, 510-790-1010. The office is co-located with 23 other organizations.
- **Livermore:** 1453 First Street, 925-583-3772.

For more information, <http://www.askferc.org/>. Again, the FERC Warm Line is 1-888-896-3372.