

## Family Education and Resource Center (FERC)

*Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas*

At our June 25 information meeting, Director **Odessa Caton** of the Family Education and Resource Center (FERC, <https://ferc.org>) shared their offerings for families across a multitude of services.

In 2004, when the Mental Health Services Act became a reality, the Mental Health Association of Alameda County (MHAAC), under the leadership of Steve Bischoff, along with NAMI affiliates and county leadership, put forth the notion of a comprehensive family resource with paid staff. After a lot of work negotiating the system and the funding, FERC became a reality in 2009. And that reality includes physical offices that are open daily during the week with a Warm Line for referrals (888-896-3372) and a 24-hour mental health crisis line (just 988). They offer brochures, books, support groups, and a staff trained to help. The volunteer-based NAMI affiliates cannot operate nor provide services at that level.

“Our mission,” Caton said, “is empowering families and supporting mental health.” FERC’s programming is part of the Mental Health Association of Alameda County, operates under contract with Alameda County Behavioral Health Services (ACBHS), and is unique to the county. FERC has 16 paid staff members, including family advocates, family navigators, and program directors—all of whom have lived experience as family caregivers to loved ones with mental health conditions or a substance abuse disorder. “We want to empower adults, youths, and family members to live their best lives through education, resources, support, and advocacy,” she said. “We are partnering with people, joining with folks to help them so that they can help their loved ones.”

An exciting new program at FERC is for family members with a loved one who is re-entering society from incarceration. For this, FERC gets referrals from community-based organizations and sometimes from the district attorney’s office.

To gain access to FERC’s services, call the Warm Line (888-896-3372), which is staffed Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Anyone can call: family member or loved one. The coordinator who answers is bilingual in English and Spanish<sup>1</sup> and will assign you to a family advocate who can offer services. You can also email the office at [askferc@mhaac.org](mailto:askferc@mhaac.org). You can meet with an advocate in person or by online hybrid. Support groups are offered both in person and hybrid, too.

Services at FERC include:

- **One-on-one support with a family advocate.** They can provide education on resources and options, information about a loved one’s diagnosis, and family members’ self-care. “We know that family caregivers may experience declines in mental and physical health, too,” Caton said. The advocates can attend individualized education plan meetings at school and court dates for the loved one, as well

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<sup>1</sup> The staff can provide support in a variety of 15 other languages, including Tagalog.

as provide referrals. They can provide family members with emotional support and advocacy.

- **Support groups.** Groups meet four times a month, both in person and virtually, and are available in both English and Spanish. Most are founded on the NAMI support-group model, but some are based on physical activities. “Support groups offer a safe space, judgment free and confidential, where you can connect with others,” she said. “They provide emotional support where you learn that you are not alone.”
- **Workshops and training.** FERC offers a Lunchtime Learnings program as well as training for caregivers, community-based organizations, and educators on topics related to mental health. FERC offers evidence-based training programs like Mental Health First Aid and the NAMI Family-to-Family program. FERC is also one of the agencies that participate in Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) for police officers and clinical teams. An exciting new offering is training families for certification as a Family Member Peer Support Specialist, similar to certification programs in substance abuse.
- **Community outreach activities.** FERC members attend health fairs and community events to present information on mental health.

FERC’s main office is in Oakland at 7677 Oakport Street, Suite 100, located opposite the Coliseum off Interstate 880. Satellite offices are also located in Fremont and in Pleasanton near Santa Rita Jail for the re-entry program.

**Q. Do you need insurance to access FERC’s services?**

A. The services are free, requiring no insurance or payment.

**Q. Can you access FERC if you live in another county?**

A. Either the family member or the loved one must live in Alameda County, but call the Warm Line (888-896-3372), and we’ll try to get you a referral.

**Q. With all the funding turmoil in Washington, DC, what will be FERC’s future?**

A. Budgets for the July-to-June fiscal year for 2025-26 are set, and there should be little change. But for the 2026-27 fiscal year—who knows? These are changing times.