

How Can We Help You?

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

Major budget cuts are under way in California's mental health system, with each county determining Proposition 1 priorities for funding in the fiscal year starting in July 2026. The proposed plan for Alameda County runs more than 200 pages and trends more toward treatment efforts—including substance abuse and housing—and away from family support.

We have devastating news that Alameda County's beloved Family Education & Resource Center (FERC) is on the cut list, among other support programs of note. The loss of FERC is particularly relevant to the county's NAMI affiliates, since it was a resource of support and information for families with loved ones who have diagnoses of mental illness. FERC was well funded and well staffed, as NAMI affiliates are not, depending heavily on volunteer help. We cannot replace FERC, and we want to help our families.

The April 22 informational meeting included a **panel and group discussion** around the issue of meeting families' needs. We had experienced volunteers from our affiliate NAMI Alameda County and from the East Bay Hearing Voices Network and asked for input on services families will miss most and how these groups can help fill the gaps.

Both NAMI affiliates—and the two others in the county, in the Fremont and Livermore areas—offer **support groups** for family members and peers. One possible improvement would be for the affiliates to begin putting the schedules and meeting places or Zoom links of others' groups on their own calendars and websites.

The Bay Area Hearing Voices Network (www.bayareahearingvoices.org) also offers group meetings, Monday to Wednesday from 6 to 7:30 p.m., for people who hear voices or have other unusual experiences and their family members. The organization offers validation and community, treats these experiences as real and not a pathological process, and avoids diagnostic categorizations like “schizophrenia” and “psychosis.” However, the group is not anti-medication.

NAMI Alameda County (namialamedacounty.org) maintains a family **“warm line”** (510-334-7721) from 8 a.m. into the evening that provides information on local services and resources. They have access to a person, currently with FERC, who has experience with the criminal justice system and can advise families whose loved ones are incarcerated.

In this modern communication age, the NAMI affiliates could also consider hosting **podcasts** on local services and issues related to mental health.

With the closing of several wellness centers in the county, there is a need for **peer socialization** opportunities. NAMI Alameda County offers two Entertainment Nights each month, one with a movie and the other with music. NAMI East Bay has in the past offered game nights with board games and pizza. And FERC has offered online bingo, which one of the affiliates might pick up.

Another suggestion is to collaborate with **partial hospitalization programs (PHPs)** and **intensive outpatient programs (IOPs)** to address peer needs. Peers in recovery who are members of NAMI Alameda County also participate in the In Our Own Voice (IOOV) program to tell their stories to patients at psychiatric hospitals, letting them know that better things lie ahead.

Peer advocacy groups are also available for collaboration. These include the Schizophrenia and Psychosis Action Alliance (sczaction.org) and the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (www.dbsalliance.org).

The NAMI affiliates could also sponsor **more collaboration** among themselves and more **in-person events**, like tables at community fairs and socialization events. However, they would need to recruit more volunteers to work on these programs.