For Maura Kelley, who describes herself as having many mental health diagnoses, stigma affects every aspect of her life. Kelley’s journey has taken her from homelessness, hospitalization and suicide attempts to owning a home and leading a non-profit agency. Kelley is the director of the Mental Health Peer Connection, part of the WNY Independent Living, Inc. Family of Agencies, a peer-driven advocacy organization dedicated to facilitating self-directed growth, wellness and choice through genuine peer mentoring. "Stigma is rampant and I’ve encountered it all my life,” she said. "People don’t know how to deal with people with mental illness. They treat us differently and don’t address mental illness like they would address cancer.” During the 1990s, Kelley left her home in Olean, found her way to Buffalo, and lived for a time in her car. Her mental illness caused her to remove herself from society, unable to deal with day-to-day life. She eventually came to live in someone’s basement and then received help through HUD Housing and the Independent Living Center. She overcame these obstacles and now helps others with mental health challenges.

Dale Zuchlewski, Executive Director, Homeless Alliance of Western New York, reports that 80 percent of homeless people may suffer from mental illness and trauma. The organization’s priority is getting people into safe housing first and then working on other issues once they are settled. Street outreach is critical, and it may take years to build up trust of individuals living on the streets. The success rate of maintaining housing is 95 percent if someone can stay off the street for one year. ”Many people feel that individuals living on the streets have a rational choice,” Zuchlewski said. “However their condition prevents them from making a rational choice.” According to Zuchlewski, there is a gap in service for people with extreme mental health conditions - more outreach and funding is needed. "One of the most beneficial treatment for severe mental illness is housing,” he said.

According to the Erie County Department of Mental Health, stigma is a factor that impacts the lives of those
served by the department on a daily basis. Housing stability relies on multiple factors in order to work and is often hindered by mental health stigma in the community. These factors include support needed to maintain employment, employers willing to work with this population, and sensitive landlords who also provide quality housing. "There are also several reports showing the risk of being a victim of a crime going up with having a mental illness diagnosis," Andrew Dearing, Assistant Housing Coordinator for Erie County. "Maintaining housing is difficult when also navigating the justice system," he said. Some of the obstacles to assisting the homeless population include locating adequate affordable housing, keeping up with mental health treatment and management of public benefits, navigating community services, and transportation and mobility issues.

The National Coalition for the Homeless cites that mental illness may cause people to misinterpret others’ guidance and react irrationally. This often results in pushing away family and friends who are trying to prevent that person from becoming homeless. This was the experience of Anne Showers of Williamsville whose mother Barbara had schizophrenia and was homeless several times. Barbara passed away when she was 60 years old. Showers describes her mother as a brilliant woman educated at Yale, a talented pianist with a loving family. She spent time in and out of hospitals and faced struggles with landlords who did not understand her challenges. Her mother was too paranoid to sign documents, something that prevented access to necessary services and housing.

Showers says the system failed her mother, and now advocates for better communication between police, hospitals and agencies and more safe housing. "Just because someone is homeless, professionals still need to conduct due diligence to find their family." Showers feels the outcome would have been different if they were contacted when she returned to the streets. "My mother did not choose homelessness," she said. Case managers should also be able to make more decisions and sign certain documents for individuals with serious mental health diagnoses. "The general public thinks it could never happen to them or someone they love," Showers said. "They may only see the barriers they want to see or can see."

Continuing the conversation about mental illness can reduce and even eliminate the stigma of mental illness and potentially reduce homelessness. "If more people talk to each other, it empowers us and give us more tools to use," said Kelley. "Things have improved, the language is changing, but there is still a long way to go. People with mental illness need to become advocates, and advocate for each other."

**To learn about more mental health resources and programs, visit**

LetstalkStigma.org
The Erie County Office for People with Disabilities exists to foster collaboration with the county’s service providers, provide advocacy, serve as a resource, educate the public, and seek to enhance the quality of life for people with a disability. We recently spoke with Frank Cammarata III, MPA, Executive Director, regarding the stigma of mental illness.

Q: HOW DOES STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS AFFECT YOUR AGENCY’S CLIENTS?
The stigma of a mental health diagnosis affects people who connect with our office in many ways, but most importantly through the aspects of daily living. We assist people who struggle with seeking employment opportunities, people seeking employment accommodations, seeking housing, seeking medical and general day to day services. We are available to provide linkage and referral to services they may not be aware exist. People are stigmatized in all aspects of their lives.

Q: WHY ARE YOU INVOLVED IN THE JOIN THE CONVERSATION CAMPAIGN?
I have been involved with the campaign from the beginning for many reasons. I have family and friends involved in providing services for people in need. I have known many people affected by mental health diagnoses and know how challenging their life can be on a daily basis when they are stigmatized in work, educational, or housing situations. I have worked many years on anti-stigma campaigns and understand the value of the message. Most importantly, it is vital that we lend our voice and office to this important campaign.

Q: WHY WOULD YOU ENCOURAGE OTHER ORGANIZATIONS TO BECOME INVOLVED IN THIS EFFORT?
Mental health diagnoses along with all other disabilities affect almost 20 percent of our population, as we age the chance of having a disability increase to almost 49 percent. I think it is important and I would like to encourage any and all organizations to become involved because you don’t know when or if it will affect you or a loved one at some point in time. The community needs to be aware of the hurt caused by stigma, and the difficulty it creates for a person. Bullying and stigmatizing occur every day in schools, work, and throughout our community. We all need to be more understanding and accepting and know we each can make a contribution to society.

ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION
FOUNDING MEMBERS

- BryLin Behavioral Health System
- Children’s Mental Health Coalition of WNY, Inc.
- Compeer
- Crisis Services of Erie County
- Erie County Department of Mental Health
- Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
- Fellows Action Network
- Fuerst Consulting Corp.
- Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County
- Mental Health Advocates of WNY
- Millennium Collaborative Care
- Patrick P. Lee Foundation
- Preventionfocus, Inc.
- Telesco Creative Group
- Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation

Events

APRIL 9
NAMI Family-to-Family Education Program

APRIL 14
The Pain Remains

APRIL 17
Adult Mental Health First Aid

APRIL 17
Color Me Healthy: Family and Caregivers

To see a full list of events for the month of March, please visit,
LetsTalkStigma.org