



## Stigma is Greater Among African Americans

Peer Support Specialist Leslie Saunders says that stigma is rampant within the African American community.

“With the efforts, at best, we are just touching the surface,” he said.

Many people feel shame and choose to try to get better on their own. They attempt to “suck it up” and live with it or self-medicate to meet their needs. Families may also contribute to stigma, preferring to keep mental health challenges within the family.

Saunders says there is a lack of a strategic approach to educate people that they can improve and learn to live with their diagnosis through treatment.

According to NAMI, approximately 30 percent of African American adults with mental illness receive treatment each year, compared to the U.S. average of 43 percent.

There are many factors that may contribute to the stigma around mental illness in the minority community. According to Karl Shallowhorn, chair of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition and education program coordinator, Community Health Center of Buffalo, Inc., these can include a long history of racial discrimination and multi-generational issues.

*“Both women and men experience stigma,” Shallowhorn said. “Women are maternal and may carry the weight of their families, they feel they can’t show weakness and have to be present for their families,” he said. “And men often don’t communicate and are not willing to show signs of vulnerability.”*

In the African American community, people are less inclined to share their mental health struggles or rely on church



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NAMI

and social communities for support rather than seeking professional help.

Join the Conversation and many community partners are working to address this issue through education and outreach. A community forum was held on Tuesday, October 1 at 6 p.m. at the Frank E. Merriweather, Jr. Library. Speakers included Anti-Stigma Coalition chair Karl Shallowhorn.

Erin M. Moss LMHC, one of the panelists for the October 1 program, explains that poverty and social structure also have an impact on people seeking treatment.

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*"With our historical roots, there are so many disparities and black people have been oppressed on a mass scale," she said.*

*"People are afraid to trust."*

They may be reluctant to seek medical care because of shame or fear of how they will be treated. Moss also suggests that people don't seek treatment because they can't find a provider that looks like them or understands what they are experiencing.

"People don't hesitate to seek medical treatment for other medical issues, yet there is shame across the board regarding mental health," Moss said.

Anti-Stigma Coalition organizational member Community Health Center of Buffalo serves a large African American population. Horizon Health, Best Self and other providers provide behavioral health to the African American population as well.

One of Shallowhorn's goals as the new chair of the Coalition, is to expand the Let's Talk Stigma campaign to groups and organizations in local communities of color where stigma is a significant issue. ■

## QUESTIONS TO ASK OF POTENTIAL MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS

- Have you treated other African Americans?
- Have you received training in cultural competence or on African American mental health?
- How do you see our cultural backgrounds influencing our communication & my treatment?
- How do you plan to integrate my beliefs & practices in my treatment?

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## WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBERS



Visit [letstalkstigma.org/current-members](http://letstalkstigma.org/current-members) for more information on our current members



Visit our events page at

**LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/EVENTS**

For a list of local mental Health Events in your community

# “You’re a strong black woman, just deal with it.”

*Carlette Bradley*

## Finding The Strength To End Stigma

“You’re a strong black woman, just deal with it.” “Pray about it and everything will be fine.” These are two phrases that were preached to me from a very young age. I would bet my last dollar that if I stop any African American woman on the street and ask her, she has heard one or both phrases also preached to her. Unfortunately, these are also the two phrases that kept me stuck in a web of denial and pain as I grappled with depression for many years.

*Being a strong black woman that just deals with it was a generational rite of passage.*

It’s as if dealing with pain or mental health struggles on your own, untreated, undiagnosed was a way of proving that you’ve earned the family name. In my late twenties and early thirties, I did just that. I wouldn’t dare think of letting all the strong black women that came before me down by going to see a therapist or talking to strangers about my struggles or ever consider filling a prescription that would help me cope with anxiety or depression. I better not! Would it make me weak? Would it somehow make me less black if I did? These are questions that I asked myself.

African American communities have largely depended on church, religion and God for support for many decades and my family is no exception. Growing up in the church, I can remember hearing others refer to church members who

“just weren’t right in the head” and allude to the fact that “we” just need to keep praying about it and they’ll be fine. So consequently, when I didn’t feel quite right in the head, I thought that if I prayed hard enough all my troubles would go away. Not so much. Prayer alone wasn’t enough for me. I’m grateful that I finally arrived at a place of desperation that dispelled those myths. I finally cared more about myself than I did about what others thought of me. I sought care and received help.

It turns out that seeking help took more strength than I thought I was displaying by suffering alone. Having a mental illness in my community is not as taboo as it used to be but there is still so much education that needs to happen, especially in the black urban church. I have a personal goal to bring education into the churches of WNY. Pastors and leaders must become better equipped because there is still a huge population of African Americans that will turn to their



religious leaders for the answers of things that should be addressed by a mental health professional. There is so much work to do.

**Carlette Bradley**

*Learning & Development Consultant  
Motivational Speaker  
Coach | Facilitator*

## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

# A Q&A with Parent Network of WNY

Parent Network of WNY is a not-for-profit agency that provides education and resources for families of individuals with special needs (birth through adulthood) and for professionals. The agency provides one-on-one support and education through resources, workshops and support groups to assist families of individuals with disabilities to understand their disability and navigate the support service system.

We recently spoke with **Susan Barlow, Executive Director**, to learn about the agency's work and their commitment to end stigma.



## Why did your agency choose to become a member of The Anti-Stigma coalition?

Parent Network of WNY wants to help end the stigma and continue the conversation about mental health.

## How does the campaign align with your work?

Parent Network of WNY supports individuals with all disabilities. Some of these individuals have mental health challenges. We work to continue the conversation and connect individuals to the right resources.

## What impact is the Campaign having in the community, in your opinion?

This campaign details stories of individuals with mental health challenges which helps the community to better recognize and understand these challenges.



## BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at [letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge](http://letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge).

It is going to take a massive community effort to move the needle on stigma, please become a part of the solution. Questions? Please contact Karl Shallowhorn, Chairperson, at [kshallowhorn@chcb.net](mailto:kshallowhorn@chcb.net).

ERIE COUNTY  
**ANTI-STIGMA**  
COALITION

### **Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition Founding Members:**

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Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County  
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities  
Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County  
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