The Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition celebrated the five-year anniversary of its successful campaign, Join the Conversation (letstalkstigma.org) at a community breakfast event on May 25 at WNED studios in downtown Buffalo. The event was sponsored by The Patrick P. Lee Foundation, a founding member and funder of the campaign.

Join the Conversation, a public awareness campaign launched in May 2017, promotes mental health awareness, and works to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental illness, which is often a barrier preventing people from speaking up and seeking help. The Coalition was started by 16 founding organizations and uses a comprehensive, multi-media campaign, including broadcast, website, social media, digital advertising, and grassroots tools to spread the message.

Melinda DuBois, chairperson, Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition and executive director, Mental Health Advocates of WNY, said that the world has changed since the initial launch of Join the Conversation.

“While our research shows that more and more people are willing to talk about their mental health, there still remains discrimination due to mental health challenges,” DuBois said. “Unfortunately, the pandemic has led to an increase in cases of anxiety and depression. The collective trauma of COVID-19, other societal conditions, and global unrest has only worsened an existing mental health crisis—disproportionately affecting communities of color and our nation’s youth.”

Continued on Page 2
One of the highlights of the member gathering was a keynote address by Kelly Marie Wofford, director of the Erie County Department of Health’s Office of Health Equity (OHE).

She shared her personal mental health journey and encouraged every individual can do their part to improve our community. Wofford said it was a challenging time following the Jefferson Street Tops shooting and a strain on mental health for many people.

Max Donatelli was the Coalition’s first chairperson and remembers why the campaign was created.

“The Coalition’s Join the Conversation campaign is gaining momentum and changing how people view mental illness. To date, 3,784 individuals have taken the online pledge to end stigma. The pledge seeks to eliminate harmful labels like “crazy” or “nuts” in everyday language and is found on letstalkstigma.org. There are more than 105,000 website users and thousands more follow the message on social media.

According to Matthew Smith, chair of the Anti-Stigma Coalition’s Outreach Committee and executive director of Preventionfocus, Inc., the Outreach Committee is charged with the task of sharing the anti-stigma message and inviting people to join as individual pledge takers or organizational members. Prior to the pandemic, the group hosted special events, distributed materials, and hosted speakers to engage with the community.

“It feels amazing to me that it is now five years that we have built a successful campaign to help end the stigma of mental illness,” he said. “Starting from a table discussion at a retreat, we have helped increase our community’s awareness of it being okay to get help when experiencing emotional hurt and/or the effects of trauma. My sincere thanks to our team for its tireless efforts and dedication to getting the word out and never giving up.” Donatelli said.

Donatelli was recognized as one of the Coalition’s founders along with Michele Brown and Marlene Schillinger.
“Hopefully, through the topics and populations (from veterans to college students to LGBTQ+ and more) we can get an audience engaged that hasn’t seen us before and maybe some of them will join the effort,” Smith said.

Additional highlights of the campaign include expansion into Niagara County, and research demonstrating positive outcomes and changing attitudes in Western New York.

The campaign has been funded by the Erie County Department of Mental Health, The Patrick P. Lee Foundation, The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation and the NYS Office of Mental Health.

“The Coalition has met with success these past five years, but there is more to be done,” DuBois said. “We will continue to expand the campaign’s reach and encourage and give people from all communities the ability to talk about their struggles. The path to healing is by continuing the conversation about stigma, providing information and resources, and removing barriers to treatment for all.”

Given the ongoing effects of the current COVID pandemic, it is even more important that we broaden our efforts to end stigma and encourage everyone who needs it to get the help they need.

MAX DONATELLI
FOUNDING CHAIRPERSON, ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

---

**PROGRAMS & SUPPORT GROUPS**

**ENDEAVOR’S CLUBHOUSE**

Drop in community-based center that supports its members through holistic, innovative, fun, and educational services.

716-895-6700 ext. 4907 / clubhouse@ehsny.org

**EPIC’S FAMILIES IN TRANSITION**

Intensive parenting program designed to overcome challenges through targeted education and support to keep children safe.

Contact Nina Littlejohn at LittlejohnN@epicforchildren.org

**PEOPLE INC. HEADWAY SUPPORT GROUP**

Bimonthly support groups for anyone living with a traumatic brain injury (TBI) or other cognitive condition, as well as caregivers, friends and family members. Newcomers are always welcome.

Contact support@headwayofwny.org

**MHA OF WNY: WRITING & WELL-BEING WORKSHOP: ZOOM**

Our writing workshops are free and open to everyone. We use writing prompts to express ourselves, increase socialization and self-esteem, and support our mental health recovery.

For more information or to RSVP, contact Bridget at bmcnally@mhawny.org or (716) 886-1242, ext 347.
Newly Appointed Director of Health Equity Featured Speaker at ASC Member Meeting

Kelly Marie Wofford, inaugural director of the Erie County Department of Health’s Office of Health Equity (OHE) is the featured speaker at the Anti-Stigma Coalition’s member meeting on May 25. She will share her personal mental health journey and talk about how to improve health equity in Western New York. Her dedication to health equity has given her the opportunity to be an instrumental asset in the development of the Buffalo Center for Health Equity and the UB Community Health Equity Research Institute.

The newly created OHE will help ensure all minority and disadvantaged residents have equal access to preventive health care and will seek ways to promote health and prevent diseases and conditions that are prevalent among minority, marginalized, and disadvantaged populations including in rural areas.

Wofford is also the founder and principal of Front Seat Life, LLC, an organization dedicated to eliminating barriers to mental health and wellness. Living with several mental health disorders including borderline personality disorder, she shares her story to help others on their healing journey. Wofford is dedicated to ensuring all people have the same opportunity to live a healthy life no matter where they live, work, play, or worship.

"It’s so important to create spaces where people can show up as their whole selves. Living with shame and stigma of a mental health disorder hinders so many people from seeking help and embracing who they are regardless of what condition they may live with," Wofford said. "We have to not only talk about mental health in all its forms but also to build a society where shame and stigma no longer exist."
New Directions Youth and Family Services is a non-profit built on 150-years of service and a proven record of responding to the needs of the communities we serve.

Skilled staff empower children experiencing emotional, educational, and social challenges, serving more than 2000 children and families annually. We help youth grow emotionally, behaviorally, and educationally, managing a continuum of services that includes mental health, community-based prevention, education, residential and foster care, across WNY.

Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

New Directions absolutely believes in the importance of erasing stigma so that all children and families can confidently access and receive the mental health support they need.

As an agency providing a range of services across in Erie and Niagara Counties, New Directions had great interest in joining an initiative to reduce stigma surrounding mental health. The work of The Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition aligns well with New Directions' mission to foster resilient, self-reliant families and permanence for at-risk children in the shortest time possible, by promoting safe, respectful, responsible, and goal-directed behavior.

We are grateful to be uniting with Coalition members across Erie and Niagara Counties who are all working to change public perceptions about mental health and end stigma.

How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

Stigma allows for isolation and prevents connections with the people, services, and supports that can make a difference.

Stigma prevents individuals from all cultures and backgrounds from seeking and receiving the support and interventions they need and deserve. Despite efforts to increase mental health services to the community, the fear of judgment inhibits people from recognizing symptoms, asking for support, and obtaining the necessary treatment to improve their quality of life.

Many people worry about being labeled in a negative way, being perceived as less than capable in an employment setting or being outcast in social circles. There is a fear of being harassed or bullied, overlooked for employment opportunities or advancement, and being misunderstood by friends and family.

Reluctance or fear of addressing mental health concerns leads to social isolation, increased mental health symptoms, challenges in relationships, lowered self-esteem, and difficulty setting and obtaining goals. Stigma can create a generational cycle; parents/guardians whose mental health needs are not addressed may also not recognize and address their children's mental health needs, leading to more complex concerns and increased risk of potential traumatic experiences.

Continued on Next Page
Stigma prevents individuals from reaching their full capabilities. We are all connected. When even one member of a group is limited because of stigma, we are all adversely impacted.

What impact is the Let’s Talk Stigma Campaign having in the community?

The Let’s talk Stigma Campaign is a platform for honest and much-needed conversations. The Campaign creates opportunities to pause, listen, reflect, inform, and empowers us to do better.

Comprehensive health and wellness are important. It would be wonderful for all individuals to seek support and be able to address their mental health needs as easily and thoroughly as their medical needs. Our society promotes healthy lifestyles, nutrition, activity, and physical health, yet fails to acknowledge that social, emotional, and mental health are key components.

Working toward incorporating whole health to include mental health components is key to reducing stigma and increasing utilization of services. Together we can end stigma and bring our communities to a place of support that honors those seeking services.