

Historical Narrative of NAMI South Dakota

As of September 2008

In July of 1987, several scattered-site family support groups came together at Brookings, South Dakota, to form a steering committee which was charged with development of a statewide family support, education and advocacy organization. At the same time, the South Dakota Division of Mental Health applied for grant funding from the National Institute of Mental Health to secure funding for development of such an organization, which was given to this steering committee.

By September of 1988, a network of family support groups had been developed in several cities in South Dakota, the steering committee had developed a slate of officers and board members for election by the general membership and it produced the first of the on-going annual statewide conferences. Ten have been held to this point.

The Board of Directors of the organization, the South Dakota Alliance for the Mentally Ill, was, and continues to be, made up of family members of persons with mental illnesses or persons who have such illnesses as well as persons who are interested in improving the lives of those who are affected by mental illness. Care is taken to ensure geographical representation from throughout the State. There is a mix of family members, consumers and professionals on the board.

The Board of Directors developed a long-range plan for activities and a list of priorities for improvement of the service system of treatment and rehabilitation. That plan and the priorities have been revisited several times during the twenty-one year history of the group for revisions and amendments. Many of the members of the Board of Directors serve, or have served, on the South Dakota Mental Health Planning and Advisory Council and other task forces, committees and councils, in order to have the family and consumer voice heard in the planning process for the State funded system of services.

The board developed bylaws which were approved by the general membership and it achieved non-profit status with the Internal Revenue Service as a public 501 c 3 organization, as well as incorporation in the State of South Dakota. The organization is chartered as a State affiliate of NAMI (the national organization – National Alliance on Mental Illness). In accordance with a vote of the general membership of the NAMI, each affiliated organization will also change their name to become NAMI _____ .

The mission and goals of the organization are delineated in the bylaws as follows:

The Mission of NAMI South Dakota is “To provide education and support for individuals and families impacted by brain-based disorders (mental illnesses), advocate for the development of a comprehensive system of services, and lessen the stigma in the general public.”

NAMI South Dakota will accomplish its mission through the following:

1. Advocating for a continuum of support services in the community for persons with mental illnesses including appropriate housing; rehabilitation services including education about the consumer’s illness and about coping strategies; a range of employment

opportunities; assistance with disability benefit applications and with applications for other benefits for which consumers are eligible; medical services, including medication oversight; supportive socialization programs including drop-in centers; and-for coordination of all of these services.

2. Evaluating existing mental health/mental illness care facilities, staff, and programming for accountability and to promote improved hospital and mental health center services; as well as monitoring activities and budgets of state agencies.
3. Educating the public to dispel myths and to overcome stigma associated with mental illness and to build support and understanding for persons with mental illnesses by developing, presenting and participating in public education programs at both the state and local affiliate level.
4. Educating professional providers of services; administrators who manage service programs; state government officials; and legislators, with the intent to encourage adequate funding for mental health/ mental illness facilities and/or programs; including residential facilities.
5. Educating professional providers of services; administrators; state officials; university and other training professionals who train providers of services for persons with mental illnesses; and the public, regarding the need for individualized treatment of those persons and about the rights of both the family and the person who has a mental illness.
6. Educating legislators and the public about legislation which affects either persons with mental illnesses or the services which they need to remain successfully in their home communities.
7. Coordinating the activities of NAMI South Dakota and the activities of local affiliate groups through use of the state office which serves as an information collection and dissemination center for affiliates in South Dakota and by providing a yearly statewide conference including the annual business meeting and election.
8. Supporting the continued development of family support and advocacy affiliate groups in South Dakota with educational materials; informational programs; and other necessary technical assistance and by soliciting and receiving funds in support of NAMI South Dakota activities and local affiliate development.
9. Establishing cooperative liaisons with other groups willing to support and work for these principles.

Since its inception, NAMI South Dakota has increased the number of state affiliate groups from a handful to nine. It has provided annual education at its statewide conference to from 100 to over 200 persons each year. A newsletter goes to more than 1700 persons on a bi-monthly basis. The 1-800 number is very busy and information is

shared over the phone and by responding to the queries by mailing information. A particularly important activity is the teaching of family members in the Family to Family Education Course which assists families in recognizing the traumatic nature of their experience and learning how to cope with that trauma while providing support and understanding to the person who is ill. A similar effort is now being provided for consumer members of the organization through the development of the NAMI Connection weekly support group program and the In Our Own Voice education and outreach program. There is also a statewide Consumer Council which serves as an advisory group to the NAMI South Dakota board of directors.

Interest is being sought for interest in expanding programming to include NAMI Basics, an educational program for caregivers of children and adolescents who have a mental illness.

A collaborative effort with a coalition of mental illness care providers, advocates, and non-profit agencies resulted in the passage of legislation to create parity health insurance coverage for biological brain disorders in all health insurance policies issued or delivered in South Dakota.

Any person who shares the mission and supports goals of NAMI South Dakota may be a member, and most members are from within the State. Some people elect to hold memberships even though they do not live here, because of family members who do.

In the early years, NAMI South Dakota was funded through the South Dakota Division of Mental Health to provide many of these services. For many years NAMI South Dakota has been funded entirely from the generosity of people who care to make a difference. In 2004, NAMI South Dakota held its first Walk for the Mind of America. The Walk is a major source of income as well as a way to increase awareness about mental illness. The goal of all of the services provided is to increase the understanding of mental illnesses by the general public, by persons who direct and plan for services and by persons, who in the course of their lives, have contact with people with such illnesses.