Eastern State Hospital and Our Nation's Mental Health System Advocates say...What Matters Now is What Lies Ahead By: Kelly Gunning, Operations Director, NAMI Lexington

Within one week in January we experienced two days of groundbreaking news concerning mental health; both in Kentucky and nationally. On **Wednesday**, **January 16**, **2013**, President Obama released recommendations for provisions to expand and strengthen mental health services across our country. The recommendations came from Vice President Joe Biden's Task Force to Reduce Gun Violence in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in December in Newtown, Connecticut. Many mental health advocacy organizations were engaged with the task force and offered expert advice in the area of mental health and the state of our country's mental health system. NAMI was one of these participants and nationally announced that, out of tragedy we have an opportunity that only presents itself once in a generation. We have known for a very long time that the mental health system in this country has been irrevocably broken. We have before us the momentum and a point in history where the necessity; not to fix, but to *reinvent anew the mental health system* has presented itself on a national stage. The President called for 5 important steps toward a renewed focus on mental health in our country:

- Early identification and intervention including training for teachers, school resource officers and others in a position to spot the signs of mental illness and provide assistance.
- Steps for improving mental health and substance abuse treatment for individuals between the ages of 16 and 25.
- Finalizing mental health parity regulations for health insurance.
- Training more than 5,000 additional mental health professionals to serve students and young adults.
- Launching efforts to improve global/community understanding of mental illness and the importance of mental health treatment.

The President emphasizes the need for government, advocates, communities, parents, teachers and school counselors to work together. In addition, NAMI emphasizes the importance of family psycho-education and support as a critical component in meeting the challenge. The President correctly notes that the vast majority of people living with mental illness are not violent. NAMI supports fixing the existing federal background check system for gun purchases and emphasizes that this should include provisions to protect privacy and ensure that people will seek mental health treatment when needed. NAMI nationally and locally is eager to work with administrations, policy makers and providers on the definition and implementation of these important steps.

On **Friday**, **January 18**, **2013**, just two days after President Obama's historical remarks, Governor Steve Beshear announced in Lexington that the University of Kentucky would assume operation and management of the new Eastern State Hospital; slated to open in summer of this year. The governor announced that there would be greatly enhanced opportunities for teaching, research and advanced neuro-psychiatric care through UK HealthCare and that there would be some, to be determined, intersections of partnership with Bluegrass, our community based mental health service provider. Although there was no mention of the role of family and consumer advocates, dedicated members of NAMI Lexington and other major mental health advocates worked for 7 years to make the case for building the new hospital and have long been compelling forces and major proponents of replacing the pre-Civil War, nearly 200 year old Eastern State Hospital with a new state of the art healing facility.

NAMI Lexington's number one mission has been to increase consumer and family involvement and voice in the system. By assisting in evolving care to include the expertise of consumers and family members we have been successful in informing and co-developing collaborative, best practice, recovery-based programming. We have done that in a mutually beneficial way in conjunction with Bluegrass over the past 10 years. The resultant programs are progressive and successful, client and family centered; nationally award-winning programs. It is our foremost goal to continue to insure the inclusion and resonance of the family and consumer voice in community based collaborations across the continuum of care. This is the cooperative care that both the President and the Governor described. The lived experiences of families and consumers have no superior and cannot be ignored if we seriously undertake the current momentum to not only revise, but to *re-invent our mental health system*. As we move forward to help co-create and define a responsive and meaningful course for community mental health care we must include all stakeholders and embrace the wisdom and experience of each facet.

NAMI Lexington is currently immersed in the decriminalization of seriously mentally ill individuals who commit minor offenses. NAMI is working with law enforcement, criminal justice, homelessness organizations and area treatment providers to gain the broadest of perspectives and enhance successful outcomes in this area. The goal is to increase humane treatment with wrap-around services and to decrease incarceration which results in the clogging of the legal system, soaring costs and recidivism. As we cast our eyes and thoughts toward the near horizon, shining like our new hospital, NAMI Lexington shares the hope and goal for the future to increase state of the art treatment options, expertise and positive outcomes and eliminate the misunderstanding and misguided public policies of the past two centuries. What matters now is how we collectively define what lies ahead.