

# Mental Health...from Page 1A



The Nov. 15 NAMI Civic Dinner brought together a diverse group of professionals in law enforcement, government, health care and more around the important topic of mental illness. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

like the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Known as NAMI for short, the organization provides education, support and advocacy and is always working to counteract harmful stigmas that frequently work against meaningful solutions and conversations surrounding mental illness.

“NAMI is the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness,” according to nami.org.

The organization envisions a world “where all people affected by mental illness live healthy, fulfilling lives supported by a community that cares.” And area residents – especially those living with mental illness – are fortunate that the volunteers of NAMI Union County care.

NAMI Union County is one of 19 NAMI Georgia affiliates, and it serves residents in Union and surrounding counties in Georgia and North Carolina.

All NAMI volunteers of the more than 500 national affiliates are people from the communities in which they serve who have personal histories with mental illness, either through loved ones or firsthand experience.

After all, they’ve seen mental illness up close, dealt with its various complexities, and are therefore prepared to offer resources and an all-important listening ear.

NAMI Union County hosts regular support groups each month, and for people affected by depression, anxiety and any number of other mental maladies, the groups serve as a place to find hope, help and acceptance.

The Connections Support Group is free and open to anyone living with a mental

health diagnosis. It meets every Saturday from 2-3:30 p.m. at 76 Hunt Martin Street in Blairsville. All comers are welcome, and all judgment gets checked at the door prior to each meeting.

There’s also a Family Support Group to assist family members and close friends looking for resources and a place to connect with others who are dealing with similar challenges.

The family group meets the first Thursday of each month from 12-1 p.m. at New Hope Counseling, located at 76C Hunt Martin Street in Blairsville.

For more information, contact Linda Beaver at 706-835-6649 or by email at lcwmc2@yahoo.com. Beaver is president of NAMI Union County, and she is joined in the local effort by Vice President Suzanne Moore and Board Member Cat Armato.

Together, the Union County Commissioner’s Office, the City of Blairsville, and NAMI Union County, GA hosted a special Mental Health Civic Dinner in mid-November at the Union County Community Center.

There, they welcomed a diverse group of 35 community stakeholders for a discussion surrounding mental health awareness and criminal justice reform.

Particularly, the dinner served as an input session from participants in local law enforcement, health care and governance, with an eye toward recruiting volunteers from among the attendees to form a Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee.

Once formed, the goal of the committee will be “to accomplish system change that would provide effective treatment options while alleviating jail crowding,” according to program

literature.

Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris attended the Nov. 15 dinner, and he has been recognized by NAMI Union County as a local leader on creating awareness and destigmatizing mental illness.

Paris signed onto the national “Stepping Up Initiative” by resolution in August 2017, issuing a call to action “to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in our county jail.”

The initiative has included a cooperative first-step effort with local law enforcement and other first responders to, for example, further the goal of getting all officers and jailers certified in Crisis Intervention Training.

Sheriff Mack Mason has been vocal about his concerns regarding mental health, specifically that he believes people with mental illness and drug dependency should receive treatment instead of being locked behind bars.

In the last two and a half years, his office has succeeded in training roughly 75% of deputies and jailers in crisis intervention, enabling his staff to recognize mental illness, de-escalate situations, and try to help people seek treatment as an alternative to incarceration.

The civic dinner was the second step in “The Stepping Up Initiative,” wherein guests participated in a discussion centered on three main areas: the elimination of stigma, the identification of barriers to treatment, and a focus on how to become a “recovery community.”

Participants gathered around carefully coordinated tables to offer feedback. Fire Chief David Dyer sat with State Sen. Steve Gooch and others, to give an example, while District Attorney Jeff Langley offered a prosecutor’s take in conversation with health care

professionals and the Sheriff’s Office.

In addition, mental health peers in recovery were present at each table to provide the view of lived experience.

Big takeaways that afternoon included the need to: educate the community about existing resources, creating awareness, reducing stigma and seeking treatment; increase access to mental health care at all levels, from prevention to inpatient care; and work together to gain better financial support for existing programs and greater funding on the state level.

All input from the dinner has been turned over to NAMI Georgia for further aggregation, and it will be presented in the Georgia General Assembly’s 2020 Legislative Session that began last week, alongside feedback from other Mental Health Civic Dinners held around the state.

Michael McPherson of the Georgia Municipal Association assisted in leading the November civic dinner, offering opening and closing remarks highlighting the importance of the task at hand, and The View Grill at Butternut

Creek provided the dinner.

Turnout for the event exceeded both expectations and room capacity, with the level of local support for mental illness thrilling NAMI Union County volunteers.

# Legislative Session...from Page 1A

were over at the House staging a bill-signing ceremony at the same time, signing the Articles of Impeachment to be delivered to the Senate after they’ve been sitting on them for nearly 30 days.

“And so, it was clear that it was just a stunt that was orchestrated by the Speaker of the House (Nancy Pelosi) to try to embarrass the president on the same day that he’s signing this historic trade agreement. She orchestrated it to be going on simultaneously.

“Then, they hand-delivered it on the silver platter with all the pens and making a big deal about it, celebrating the fact that they were trying to impeach the president when he’s done more good, in my opinion, in the three years he’s been (in office) than we’ve seen in decades from a president – somebody that actually campaigned on something and delivered on their promises.

“I think it’s time for state legislators all over the

country to stand up and send a strong message to Congress to quit playing games with the people’s money and get back to work and get serious about solving the problems of our country.”

As fellow senators in a mountain district, Gooch and Wilkinson count each other as longtime friends and political allies, and Wilkinson echoed Gooch’s sentiments about their reasons for drawing up SR 538.

“With all the issues facing our federal government today, the budget deficit and all the things they need to be spending time on, we just feel like this was more of a political thing,” Wilkinson said. “We really think that the people of America spoke four years ago who they wanted for their president.

“They’re going to have another opportunity to speak this year, and we just feel like that ought to be their decision who’s serving as president.

We don’t feel like there’s been wrongdoing to the extent that would call for an impeachment process, and we feel like that wasted a lot of time and money that could have been better spent looking at more pressing issues.”

Wilkinson attended Gov. Brian Kemp’s State of the State Address in Atlanta on Jan. 16, and he offered some insight into what people can expect in the upcoming Legislative Session, including budget cuts proposed by the governor.

“I think the budget is going to be a big item this year,” Wilkinson said. “We gave everyone a state income tax break; that cost the state some money and our revenues have been flat, so the governor is recommending some cuts.

“We’ll be looking at what gets cut and what doesn’t get cut, so I think the budget is going to be a big focus this year during the session.”

# Union County Health Department awarded Car Seat Mini Grant

*Buckle Up Right, Every Trip, Every Time*

The Union County Health Department was awarded the 2020 Car Seat Mini-Grant by the Georgia Department of Public Health, Injury Prevention Program. Through the Mini-Grant, Union County Health Department, local government and law enforcement work together to provide car seats and education to financially eligible families in county. This program is funded by the Governor’s Office of Highway Safety to help ensure Georgia’s children are safe while riding in motor vehicles.

And it works! Since 2007, the education, car seats and booster seats provided through the Mini Grant prevented serious injury or death and saved over 300 of Georgia’s children who were in-

involved in crashes. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, car seats reduce fatal injuries by 71 percent among infants and by 54 percent among children ages 1 to 4 years in passenger cars. Car seats offer the best protection for children in the event of a crash, and they are most effective when installed and used correctly. Nearly three out of every four car seats are not used properly, placing children at unnecessary risk.

“It’s our responsibility to keep our children safe,” said Glenda McGill. “The Car Seat Mini-Grant is a great opportunity to help our community and help protect our children from serious injuries or death in motor vehicle crashes.”

In Union County, the health department staff edu-

cate parents and caregivers on how to properly install and use car seats, offer car seat inspections and provide car seats and booster seats to financially eligible families. Through the Car Seat Mini-Grant, agencies supporting more than 120 counties are working to keep Georgia’s children safe. These programs help families get their children buckled up right, every trip, every time.

For more information about the Union County car seat program, contact Union County Health Department at 706-745-6292. If you would like information regarding other counties involved in the program, please contact the Georgia Department of Public Health’s Child Occupant Safety Project via email at injury@dph.ga.gov or by calling 404-463-1487.