

Report on Meeting with NAMI Sarasota-Manatee

Background

On February 29th, our research team met with Taylor Walker (Program Manager) and Sarah Miller (Assistant Executive Director) from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Sarasota-Manatee chapter to discuss the state of mental health needs in Manatee County.

Sarah Miller- Assistant Executive Director of NAMI Sarasota-Manatee

“Sarah Miller is an advocate for building communities of care with an emphasis on tangible, natural supports to enhance prevention and sustain long-term mental health outcomes for individuals and families. A Subject Matter Expert and Change Agent, Sarah uses her combined lived and professional experiences navigating behavioral health services to inform and be a voice of the consumer, from the grassroots to the system level.”

Taylor Walker- Program Manager of NAMI Sarasota-Manatee

“Taylor Walker attended Western Illinois University where she received her BSW through an accredited Social Work program. In 2019 Taylor obtained her Master’s in social work from University of Illinois at Chicago with a focus on organization and community practice. In addition, she earned her certification and human service management. Following her Master’s program Taylor moved to Sarasota, where she serves as the Program Manager for NAMI Sarasota and Manatee Counties.”

Overview of NAMI Sarasota-Manatee

NAMI Sarasota-Manatee's mission is to improve the lives of individuals, families, and caregivers impacted by mental health challenges. They do this through support and education programs tailored to adults, youth, and caregivers. NAMI merged into Manatee County right before the pandemic, so they feel that their programs and resources are not yet widely known.

Mental Health First Aid Program

The first thing discussed outside of NAMI's mission was the Mental Health First Aid program. It is an 8-hour training course focused on teaching people how to identify early warning signs of mental illness and respond in an understanding, supportive way. They stated the program is facilitated by another organization –the National Council for Mental Well-Being. Though it is not run directly by NAMI, they find it highly beneficial for improving public knowledge and empathy surrounding mental health issues. Sarah stated some schools have their teachers participate but not all of them, as far as they were aware no organizations mandate the training for their employees.

[Click here to learn more about the Mental Health First Aid program](#)

Mental Health Needs in Manatee County

We asked if they believed there was a mental health crisis in Manatee County. We were given the statistic that 1/5 nationally are diagnosed with a mental illness. With Florida ranking 49th nationally in mental health funding, the level of need in Manatee County exceeds the available support. Sarah stated that due to a lack of funding and resources, waitlists for services are long. Mental health providers are burning out and turnover is high, which severely disrupts the continuity of care. When providers leave their positions, patients are forced to retell their deeply personal stories to new therapists, often causing re-traumatization. NAMI expressed that more funding and resources are needed nationwide and all across the state of Florida.

Reducing Stigma

NAMI finds that the sharing of personal stories from those with lived experience and uplifting the voices of those who are suffering are the most impactful ways to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. However, the shame and fear of sharing these vulnerable stories with others holds many people back. NAMI also faces challenges accessing schools due to increasing state-level restrictions around mental health education and social-emotional learning in the classroom. While teachers express interest in NAMI's programs, some administrators do not approve of implementation or conversations stall out.

Reaching Students

During their informal talks with teachers, they have expressed feeling overwhelmed with managing all of the responsibilities being given to them on top of their primary job duties of educating students. Despite interest from teachers, NAMI has trouble even getting responses when reaching out to public schools in Manatee about their "Ending the Silence" presentation, though they have had more success with private schools. They stated they have sent out joint emails to counselors and principals to no avail. This 50-minute presentation aims to reduce stigma and provide students with the fundamental skills to help recognize warning signs of mental illness and suicide as well as support peers who may be suffering. Sarah says the especially impactful part is when students hear from a youth peer who shares their story in a "what happened, what helped, and what's next format". She stated the program is well received where it has been adopted and is designed to be about the length of a single class period. However, restricted access limits the program's reach.

[Click here for more information on "Ending the Silence"](#)

YANA Wellness Centers

Down in Sarasota, NAMI highlighted the success of the YANA (You Are Not Alone) Wellness Centers. These are peer-led drop-in centers where individuals dealing with mental health challenges can socialize, access support resources, and engage in activities together in a safe, welcoming space. They are open M-F, 9-3. Made up of members who self-attest to having a mental health challenge. Lunch is provided at no cost and there are a variety of activities (art, gardening, music, etc.) focusing on socialization and comradery. Described as a safe-space approach, members can participate in Mental Health groups, education and have a voice in what is offered at the center. Sarah said that it is NAMI's vision of a better

world where everyone has a place where they feel they belong. On average they have 20+ people in attendance daily. This program came to be through the Central Florida Behavioral Health Network offering bids. CASL (Community Assisted & Supported Living, Inc.) applied with NAMI as a partner and sub-contractor to run the program. The buildings were donated by people within the community. NAMI stated that so many different opportunities have come from the YANA Wellness Centers and they serve as a valued community asset in Sarasota & Venice.

[Click here to learn more about the "YANA" Wellness Centers](#)

Priorities, Limitations and Funding

NAMI stated they did not have a “top” priority as they serve many groups. However, they named their priorities as spreading awareness of resources and expanding their programs in Manatee County, providing inclusive safe spaces to increase individuals' sense of belonging, and working to help destigmatize mental illness and seeking treatment. However, limitations like lack of response from school administrators, staffing shortages, bureaucratic restrictions around Social-Emotional Learning, lack of diversity in treatment options, insufficient funding/resources and organizational awareness post-pandemic pose barriers. In terms of funding, NAMI relies heavily on grants, donations, and community support. They stated that more funding is needed for them to expand capacity.

Improving the Landscape

Frustration runs high over the gaps preventing people from getting needed support. NAMI asserted that expanding peer-led services, education, awareness, and community collaboration would move the needle. Safe spaces are critical, as isolation exacerbates struggles but interpersonal connection and belonging can help achieve stability. Reducing societal stressors that negatively impact mental health is also needed.

“People get crushed when they feel alone, that is when things get really bad” – Sarah Miller