

NATIVE AMERICAN MENTAL HEALTH SUMMIT

Friday, July 24, 2009, NAMI Tennessee hosted the state's first Native American Mental Health Summit. The event was attended by members of both the Native community and non-Native community, consumer/family-member, and health-care providers. The participants were as diverse as the issues, and providers included Veterans Administration, Indian Health Services, pharmaceutical companies, and insurance companies, with many attendees in the provider category being Native American as well.

The background of Sponsorship/Exhibitors' booths were balanced out by the display of artwork by world-renowned and acclaimed Chickasaw artist, Ron Anderson of Oklahoma, who attended the conference with his own booth.

The three presenters, Ron Morton, Ron Christman, and Renee Lopes-Pocknett shared their personal experiences from their own communities of Native consumers' battles for equal and culturally competent services, as well as the effects of the dominant society on the Native communities. Then, they issued forth an ultimatum for providers: Pursue the treatment of Native people with passion and compassion, or find another job.



Ron Morton (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma), Ron Christman (Viejaz Band of Kumayaay), Jimi Kelley (Quapaw/Cherokee), Maya Smith (Soponi/Mohawk) and Renee Lopes-Pocknett (Wampanoag)

The audience was then split into two discussion groups:

1. Native American mental health, substance-abuse consumers/family-members
2. Health-Care Providers (whether Native or otherwise)

The first group was facilitated by Ron Christman and Renee Lopes-Pocknett, while Ron Morton was joined by Robert Chapman, a Recovery Counselor at the Recovery Ranch, a D&A treatment facility which uses the Medicine Wheel and Lodges as part of the treatment program.

The consumer/family-member group was given the task of creating a list of barriers within the system they have encountered or observed, with action steps to address them. The provider group was first given a brief, recent history of Native experience in the 21st Century, and challenged to address disparities in Tennessee by providing insight where improvements may be made within the mental health care system in its dealings with Native Americans.

After each discussion group had reached its conclusions, it was time for lunch. Jason Godsey, a reputable caterer and competition BB-Q champion from the Qualla Boundary Cherokee Reservation in North Carolina, delighted guests with a long buffet that included three varieties of Wild Boar, five varieties of Rabbit, Elk, Duck, and Buffalo. Vegetables were an Iroquois recipe for squash and zucchini blended in a secret, traditional sauce, and desserts included fresh apple

cobbler. Consumers and providers alike were divulged in a total-immersion cuisine so fragrant and tantalizing, one could not resist indulging beyond their capacity.

But, it was then time to move on to the afternoon assignment: putting the two groups together and letting them discuss the proposed resolutions, and hash out what would work and what would not.

Surprisingly, most everything the two groups created were almost identical, and mirrored, as well, the resolutions created by NAMI National's American Indian/Alaska Native Leadership Committee.

The resolutions were, for NAMI Tennessee:

1. Create a network and database for all Native organizations in Tennessee, what services they provide, and any criteria they may have for participants. The purposes being
 - A. To provide resources to Native people new to the state, or to a particular area of the state
 - B. To provide Native Americans a resource list of social and Ceremonial opportunities to assist with mental health/substance-abuse treatment. (And allows Ceremony-Keeper to remain anonymous to the general public)
 - C. To prevent monopoly of any one group, Tribe, or organization over any other
2. Create Cultural Education material for Health-Care Providers specific to the area of Native people they will be providing services for
3. Create Provider resource manual for Native people, with cooperative information, and instructions how to access services

The group demonstrated very little conflict of opinion, and the representative from the Veterans Administration Hospital was forthcoming and honest, telling attendees, "The VA will never allow the burning of sage or anything else within the building." It was the kind of straight-forward discussion that participants were looking for, and an excellent launching-point for opening these relationships. (The proposed resolution to that issue, was to address the Chaplain, and seek to use the Chapel for Prayer Ceremonies involving "incense")

Everyone seemed content by the end of the day, and at 3:30 all non-Native providers were bid farewell, and the Native participants stayed around for yet another 5-star meal from Jason Godsey and his staff, this one including 3 lb. smoked turkey legs fit for a king. Guests continued discussing the day's topics over dinner, and with music in the background, until all decided that they would continue this summit as an annual event, each year completing the tasks set forth by the resolutions. These changes are things that many people are eager to see, and they will be accomplished one step, one year, one summit at a time.

The creation of a Native network/organization database has already begun.