

Commissioner Velez Convenes Dual Diagnosis Task Force

Responding to the need to plan services and supports for individuals with co-occurring developmental disabilities and mental health needs, Commissioner Jennifer Velez recently convened a Dual Diagnosis Task Force for the purpose of examining the serious service delivery issues, particularly in the area of crisis care, affecting adults and children with dual diagnosis and their families in New Jersey. The core Task Force membership is comprised of individuals with developmental disabilities, along with family members, advocates, professionals and state officials, and will be augmented by a number of subject matter experts from all over the state.

The first meeting was held on January 25, 2008. The Commissioner opened the meeting by thanking those who agreed to be a part of the task force, expressing delight that the group was finally underway, as it was a long time coming for New Jersey. "Over the next nine months, the task force will look at such things as evidence based practices, the best way to effectively respond to crises and how to address certain delivery challenges."

The task force committees will be comprised of providers, parents and most importantly, consumers. Commissioner Velez recognized Donna Icovino as



the task force co-chair, describing Donna "as a family member whose personal experiences propelled her to be the best type of advocate, one who is a positive catalyst for change. Her commitment and energy have been instrumental in getting the task force off the ground."

Donna Icovino welcomed the task force members and she was excited that her personal mission has been recognized and given support from the Governor, the Department of Human Services and the department's Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) and Division of Mental Health Services (DMHS). Dona expressed belief that the work of the task force will improve the quality and care for individuals with both developmental disabilities and mental health issues, and has opened the door for real change.

Assistant Commissioners Ritchey (DDD) and Martone (DMHS) respectively pledged their support and expressed their commitment

to bring about change to better serve the dually diagnosed community.

Kicking-off the state's efforts, Dr. Robert Fletcher, CEO of the National Association for the Dually Diagnosed, was a participant at the first meeting. Dr. Fletcher gave an in-depth presentation on the mechanics of how the task force could work toward its goals. He presented a set of 'Principles and Best Practices in Policy Development and Service Coordination'. Dr. Fletcher also stressed the need for training, with training for everyone providing services to dually diagnosed people including teachers, the providers, the workers, the families, the community care givers and medical personnel. He stressed a coordinated care system of services that are wrapped around the person; this is a work of cross training between all the service systems that are needed to support someone who is dually diagnosed. All agencies can learn from each other about how to assess and support the dually diagnosed.

With only nine months remaining to complete its work, the task force members agreed that they should get started immediately to develop their mission statement, set of principles and list of committees. DDD Today will continue to keep you updated on the developments and progress of the task force.

How many people have recently moved to the community from developmental centers?

July 2006 - June 2007 = 86 • July 2007 - January 2008 = 46



FAMILY TIES

DDD Today is introducing a new, occasional feature called "FAMILY TIES," which will present personal stories from division employees honoring their own family members or close friends who have or had a developmental disability.

My Brother Manuel By Roger Puente - DDD, Chief of Staff

My brother was born on September 22, 1961. He was born with Down syndrome as well as respiratory and heart problems. The doctors informed my mother that they did not expect him to live more than six weeks. Our family was devastated. My mother cared for my brother around the clock. My sister, Tina, who was a five year old, assisted as best as she could and was devoted to my brother. I was at a loss. At age nine, I'd looked forward to having a fellow baseball player in the family and now that did not appear possible. I would watch my sister care for Manuel and I would speak to him about baseball. He would smile from time to time, though much of the time he was in discomfort. Manuel would cry a great deal. The defective heart and breathing difficulties left him very uncomfortable and in distress or pain.

I can recall rising from bed late one night as I approached our bathroom, I looked into my brother's bedroom to see my mother standing with my brother in her arms. What amazed me was that my mother was sound asleep holding my brother in her arms. The many sleepless nights caring for him had caught up to her. That night, I witnessed a powerful lesson in commitment and sacrifice. It remains with me to this day. The toll on my mother was great. She was a striking brunette whose hair would turn completely gray within two years.

My mother never faltered in her care and my broth-

er continued to thrive. After eighteen months of age, his health took a turn for the worse. His breathing became more labored and he was admitted to the hospital. He was admitted on a Saturday, and that Saturday night was the first night that my brother would not be cared for by my mother. It was very difficult for Mom and Dad to leave him there. My father told me that he will always remember the look on Manuel's face when the nurse took him from them. It was as if he would never see them again. The following day was Mother's Day and my parents went to the hospital to visit my brother. They were shocked to learn from the hospital staff that my brother had died that night. This experience was overwhelming for my parents, and my mother in particular was in shock and extremely depressed for a number of months.

When I was in my twenties, Mom told me that "if it wasn't for my father's patience and empathy late at night as she talked about her feelings over those many weeks -- the guilt, anger and loss --, she would not have survived." It was my father's strength of character that kept us together, for my sister and I suffered as well. Tina had lost someone who represented her first child and I had lost the only brother I would have. Time does heal wounds but memories remain, vivid as if it happened only yesterday. It was a difficult and painful time, but it is often the great challenges that bring out the best in people. For through that experience, my parents taught my sister and me the true meaning of love.

