



**New Jersey Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma**  
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## **Stigma Must Be Eliminated to Encourage Individuals to Seek Mental Health Care** *May Is Mental Health Awareness Month*

**NORTH BRUNSWICK** – Statistics show that individuals struggle with mental health issues for more than a decade before reaching out for help. Their reluctance to speak up about their difficulties and seek assistance is due to stigma, which causes feelings of shame and embarrassment. As defined by the Mayo Clinic, stigma is “when someone views you in a negative way because you have a distinguishing characteristic or personal trait that’s thought to be, or actually is, a disadvantage (a negative stereotype).” Stigma is prevalent among people who are experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses, as well as among individuals who judge and discriminate against others who are struggling. Education is essential and effective for eliminating stigma.

“The silver lining of the pandemic, war and precarious economic situation is the greater understanding of mental illnesses and co-occurring disorders, as well as the budgetary and legislative initiatives to ensure access to services for the increasing number of individuals in need. These outcomes demonstrate progress toward eliminating stigma, which is the greatest barrier, along with lack of insurance coverage, to individuals from seeking treatment and other support services. However, stigma still persists and much more work needs to be done,” said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, Chair of the Governor’s Council on Mental Health Stigma, who also serves as President and CEO of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies.

“The more we learn about mental illness and what we can do to stop the stigma, the sooner people will feel more comfortable talking about mental health as freely as they do their physical health, and we can get more people into treatment earlier,” added Susan Tellone, RN, MSN, CSN, Member of the Governor’s Council on Mental Health Stigma and Clinical Director of the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide.

Tellone shared the following suggestions to help eliminate stigma:

- Use respectful language when talking about mental health conditions.
- Challenge misconceptions when you see/hear them.
- See the person, not the condition.
- Offer support if you think someone is having trouble.
- Refrain from using harmful labels.

“Becoming stigma free is a community effort. If we can eliminate stigma, we can encourage people to seek help early on, so recovery can begin, hope is instilled and lives are saved,” Tellone said. She shared the following recommendations for creating a Stigma Free community movement:

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- Run a town hall discussion explaining your community's Stigma Free goals and gather input for community events.
- Develop a media campaign and put out press releases for your Stigma Free efforts.
- Collaborate with local community service groups and local Municipal Alliance leaders to host Stigma Free educational events and celebrations.
- Work with schools to issue Stigma Free public service announcements and host poster contests.
- Set up a Stigma Free booth at town-wide events and community days.
- Develop a website or contribute to your municipality website with information about becoming Stigma Free, as well as local mental health resources.
- Promote personal stories of wellness and recovery.

The Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma aims to foster such initiatives through outreach and education, and by driving programming, policies and platforms to ensure that mental health stigma is no longer tolerated and that those with mental illness have the resources and support they need.

Members of the Council are:

- Debra L. Wentz, PhD, Council Chair; President and CEO, New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies; and Executive Director, New Jersey Mental Health Institute
- Heidi Castrillon, founder and CEO of BIZ REPUBLIC
- Emily Grossman, MA, CPRP, NYCPS-P, Director, Training Institute, Coordinated Behavioral Care
- David B. Jacobs, CPA, President and Owner, Old Tyme Syrups & Sundae Toppings
- Rev. Jose C. Lopez, State Chaplain for the New Jersey Department of Corrections
- Sam Maddali, RPh, Chief Executive Officer, United Pharmacy Network
- Amy Spagnolo, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions, Rutgers, the State University
- Susan Tellone, RN, MSN, CSN, Clinical Director, Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide
- Dr. Janon Wilson, LPC, ACS, HS-BCP, Owner and Clinical Director of Compass Counseling & Psychotherapy

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Since its inception in November 2004 under an executive order issued by then Acting Governor Richard J. Codey, the Governor's Task Force on Mental Health Stigma has been working diligently toward the goal of combatting mental health stigma as a top priority in order to create a better mental health system. The Council members represent a diverse stakeholder group from across the state who provide a variety of expertise and critical perspectives to ensure a holistic approach to examining and striving to overcome the challenges and issues facing New Jersey's richly diverse population.