

## **Media Roundtable Provides Essential Education and Guidelines for Journalists and Others**

“The power of words is undeniable, as is the power of the media,” said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, Chair of the New Jersey Governor’s Council on Mental Health Stigma, President and CEO of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA) and Executive Director of the New Jersey Mental Health Institute, in her welcome remarks for the Council’s media roundtable on October 3, 2022. “Despite the greater awareness of mental illness, there is still a lack of education, and the media play a profound role in shaping the public’s understanding — and, in some cases, misunderstanding — and opinions about mental illness, as it does on all issues. This roundtable was an important opportunity for journalists, broadcasters and news directors and others to learn how to portray mental illnesses and individuals who have them in the most accurate and positive way possible,” Dr. Wentz stated.

In his keynote presentation, Otto Wahl, PhD, Professor Emeritus, University of Hartford and Author of *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness* and *Telling Is Risky Business: Mental Health Consumers Confront Stigma*, defined the triple burden of mental illness: “Conditions that are painful, distressing, and even debilitating; a mental healthcare system that is often underfunded, disorganized, and unresponsive to their needs; and unfavorable attitudes of others towards those with mental illness – stigma.” He then shared positive and negative examples from various media and explained how journalists can help increase understanding and acceptance of mental illness. These best practices include using person-first language; not using slang or disrespectful terms; not associating mental illness with violence; incorporating the perspectives of individuals; and sharing more stories of successful treatment and recovery.

“People with mental illness deserve reporting without harming,” Dr. Wahl stressed. He elaborated on the impact of connecting violent behavior with mental illness, saying such associations foster fear and avoidance, increase experiences of isolation and exclusion, and lead to discrimination and limited opportunities in employment, education, housing and volunteering. “When stories of violence and mental illness must be reported on, reporters can put the violence in perspective. They should mention that the vast majority of people with mental illnesses are neither violent nor dangerous and that people with mental illnesses are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators,” Dr. Wahl advised. In addition, the media should talk about the possibility and high rates of successful treatment, and share such success stories.

Following the keynote, Dr. Wahl moderated a panel discussion with individuals with lived experience and journalists. Emily Grossman, MA, CPRP, NYCPS-P, Council Member and Training Director, Coordinated Behavioral Care, New York, and Shauna Moses, Vice President, Public Affairs and Member Services, NJAMHAA, shared their personal experiences with mental illness and stigma, and positive experiences being featured in various publications and online.

Grossman shared that when she was growing up, there was no discussion about mental illness, celebrities didn’t open up about their struggles and the only exposure was the stigmatizing portrayals in movies and television shows. “The media played a role in making it harder for me to love myself because of my mental illness,” she said. Fortunately, the media — though they are news publications, not the entertainment industry — have given Grossman positive experiences. A local newspaper in Montclair, NJ, shared the story about her recovery journey. “I thought it was

handled very sensitively and there was a great response from community members,” Grossman said. Her story was also shared in *Teen Vogue* and she writes articles for the *Huffington Post*. More recently, she published a book, *Unlocked: From Psych Hospital to Higher Self: 25 Keys to Recovering from Depression, Anxiety or Bipolar Disorder*.

Moses shared her positive experiences with the media. Soon after her suicidal crisis and successful treatment in a hospital in 2012, she wrote an opinion-editorial (op-ed) as a tribute to mental healthcare providers that was published. Since then, she had additional op-eds published and was interviewed by various media reporters. “The best way to get rid of stigma is for people with mental illness to share their success stories,” Moses stressed.

Lilo Stainton, Healthcare Writer, *NJ Spotlight News*, shared an encouraging observation. “This year, many publications have made a conscious effort to report more on mental health issues, in part because it is becoming more of a national issue, and in part because they are becoming more personally affected by mental health than in the past,” she said. In fact, *NJ Spotlight News* recently dedicated a reporter to behavioral health, while Stainton will continue covering other aspects of health and the healthcare system.

“It’s important to continue reporting on mental illness, the struggles and the challenges that people continue to face,” said Valerie Canady, Publishing Editor, *Mental Health Weekly*. She stressed that the phrase “individuals with mental illness” should be used, not “the mentally ill”. This reinforces the fact that people are not — and should not be — defined by any health conditions they have. It is encouraging that more people are sharing their mental health struggles. Entertainers, athletes and other celebrities are bringing mental illness “into the forefront, making us all aware,” Canady noted.

While this is certainly positive, most people cannot relate to celebrities, as Marie D. Verna, MPAP, President, Dominion Behavioral Health Policy, LLC, and a mental health advocate noted. “The language ascribed to people with mental illness has been so hurtful and I found myself being concerned with what was happening at the local level,” Verna shared. She writes a monthly column focusing on behavioral health for *Hopewell Valley News* and *Lawrenceville News*. “Regular people simply don’t know what to do when they or loved ones have mental illness, and I wanted to do something to change that. I want to let people know that this is happening around them and it’s not about anybody’s character, it’s about real people’s lives,” she said.

“Elimination of stigma is an extremely important change to make and it can happen, especially with best practices followed by news reporters, editors, anchors and producers — as well as on social media and in everyone’s daily conversations,” Dr. Wentz said.

Click [here](#) to watch a video recording of this event.

Resources:

- [The Carter Center Journalism Resource Guide on Behavioral Health](#)
- [Associated Press](#) style guide
- [7 tips for portraying mental health in a movie or series](#) from Mental Health Europe
- [Bergen County New Jersey’s Stigma Free Zone Toolkit](#)
- [NJ Health Care Quality Institute’s Mayors Wellness Toolkit](#)