



# NEW JERSEY GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON *Mental Health Stigma*

## STOPPING STIGMA

*Eliminating Stigma to Ensure Equity for All*

NEWSLETTER  
MAY 2026 ISSUE VOLUME 6

## MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

A Message from the Chair:  
Debra L. Wentz, PhD



May is Mental Health Awareness Month, a time that carries meaning for the New Jersey Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma. This issue of *Stopping Stigma* arrives at a moment of genuine momentum: We welcome four accomplished new members, celebrate the growing reach of our creative initiatives, and recommit ourselves to the work of building a New Jersey where no one faces a barrier to care because of fear, shame, or misunderstanding.

In these pages, we introduce Kiah Lattimer, MSW; Brian McArdle, MA; Monica Perkowski, MBA; and Tammy Williams, MBA. Their professional backgrounds are as varied as they are impressive, and their perspectives, spanning sectors, lived experiences, and vantage points, are precisely what strengthens our collective work. Each brings fresh insight into how far we have come and a clear-eyed vision for where we must go. I am proud to welcome them and deeply grateful for their willingness to serve.

One of the Council's most inventive recent endeavors is the *Sing! for Mental Health* project, which represents our venture into a powerful new medium: art, music, and creative expression as vehicles for education and awareness. The response has been extraordinary. Individuals and groups from across New Jersey have submitted videos, singing, dancing, and sharing messages that are at once personal and universal. We invite you to watch the featured videos on the Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma website and learn how to submit your own by clicking [here](#).

The project culminated in a live concert, *Exploring Dimensions of Wellness*, held on May 13th at The College of New Jersey's Brower Student Center. The campus setting was intentional: Research tells us that 75% of mental illnesses emerge by

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**Debra L. Wentz, PhD**

age 25, and half begin by age 14. Reaching young people early and sustaining that education over time is not optional. It is essential.

The event was informational, entertaining, and inspiring. Highlights included emcee Eric Scott of NJ 101.5 FM; a diverse array of performances featuring singing, dancing, and dramatic readings; and interactive exhibits, including New Jersey authors sharing their mental health stories, and a compelling Native American tribal dance and dialogue with attendees. The energy in that room reflected exactly what this work is about: community, creativity, and connection.

This issue also goes deeper regarding a population we must never overlook: first responders. These individuals stand on the frontlines of crisis every day, absorbing trauma so that

others can be safe. Their mental health needs are profound, and the stigma they face within their own professions and communities is often compounding. This article draws on insights from our February virtual event, along with firsthand perspectives from a former transit officer and the former spouse of a State Trooper. It also offers practical resources for first responders and the families who stand beside them.

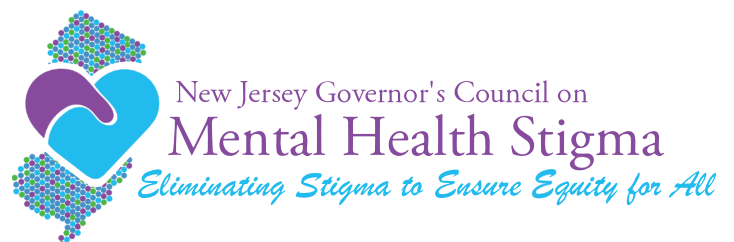
The New Jersey Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma is steadfast in its mission to build awareness, understanding, and acceptance across every sector of New Jersey society, because mental illness does not discriminate by race, ethnicity, industry, or circumstance. The progress we have made is real and meaningful. It also reminds us of how much further we must go. That tension is not discouraging. It is motivating.

Let us continue this work together, and with the urgency it deserves.

With deepest gratitude and warmest wishes,



Debra L. Wentz, PhD  
Chair





New Jersey Governor's Council on  
**Mental Health Stigma**  
*Eliminating Stigma to Ensure Equity for All*



# Join the Council's **Sing! for Mental Health** Project!



## Educate your Community about Mental Health and Stigma



The *Sing! for Mental Health Project* was designed to shine a light on exceptional people in New Jersey who are educating their own communities about mental health and stigma. Through art, music, and dance, they are creating uplifting and life-affirming messages about mental health awareness, stomping out stigma, and encouraging people to seek treatment when needed.



**CLICK HERE**

to read more details, watch the featured videos and learn how to submit your own!

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:**

**Cynthia Chazen**

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New Jersey Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma  
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# Stigma Council Welcomes New Members

The New Jersey Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma is pleased to have four new members appointed to assist in strategic planning, development and implementation of events and resources, and other initiatives to advance progress toward the mission. Based on their different backgrounds, they have a variety of knowledge and skills to contribute to that goal, which each of them personally shares with the Council.



**Kiah Lattimer, MSW**

Sales Associate  
Weichert Realtors®

## **Kiah Lattimer, MSW**

Kiah Lattimer learned about the Council when she worked in the Governor's Office during the Murphy Administration. "Prior to becoming a member, from the outside looking in, one thing that I believe the Council has played a role in successfully is educating. From my perspective, the stigma exists due to lack of education and the lack of transparency in discussions when mental health is a topic. People are more aware, more informed, and more willing to talk openly," she said.

Kiah is a social worker, public servant, realtor and dedicated mental health advocate. Through state government

roles, she has led strategic initiatives and worked across state agencies to translate priorities into meaningful, community-centered action.

She earned her Master of Social Work degree with a concentration in Clinical Practice from Capella University. In addition to providing treatment, she has facilitated workshops promoting mental wellness, resilience and access to resources, particularly for underserved and historically marginalized communities.

## **Brian McArdle, MA**

Brian McArdle learned of the Council from his lifelong friendship with Governor Richard Codey's family. "I know of the Governor's passion and determination to eliminate stigma, and I share the same devotion for such an important cause," he shared. "The Council is a broad reaching program to destigmatize mental health within families, communities, the media and beyond."

Brian has held several roles in the corporate energy sector, with a focus on government affairs, policy and regulatory compliance. He began his career in higher education at Montclair State

University, where he supported government relations and civic engagement initiatives. Following his tenure as Senior Advisor to the Governor for Economic Growth in New Jersey, Brian now serves as Senior Advisor for Corporate Engagement at the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. He holds a Master's degree in Law and Governance from Montclair State University and a Bachelor's degree in Business from Mount Saint Mary's University.



**Brian McArdle, MA**

Senior Advisor for Corporate  
Engagement  
New Jersey Economic Development  
Authority

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**Monica Perkowski, MBA**

Director of Sales  
Meyer and Associates

**Monica Perkowski, MBA**

Monica Perkowski was surprised to be recommended as a Council member and excited about the opportunity. “I have been a volunteer at heart for as long as I can remember,” she said. “I look forward to helping the Council with new ideas for marketing and positioning.”

Monica is the Director of Sales and Marketing at Meyer and Associates. She has an extensive record of community engagement, including serving as Vice-Chair of Mount St. Dominic Academy’s Board of Trustees and for the Finan-

cial Literacy for Teens Program. “We focused on empowering young people with tools for stability and confidence – factors closely tied to mental health outcomes,” she shared.

Monica has a Bachelor of Science degree from The College of New Jersey and an MBA in Marketing and Finance from The Stern School at NYU.

**Tammy Williams, MBA**

For Tammy Williams, serving on the Council has a particularly personal meaning since she lost her sister to suicide. “I didn’t have the language then to save her life and now I do. The beauty is that I learned how to help people reduce incidents of suicide and to say help is available and that seeking help is a strength,” she shared.

She has been determined to enhance children and adults’ well-being through multiple service and community leadership roles. She established the West

Orange Suicide Advocacy Coalition, which is now a foundation that led to significant reductions in suicides.

Tammy has more than 20 years of experience as a Top Producing Real Estate Broker. She earned a Master of Business Administration degree specializing in Public Administration from North Central University and a Bachelor of Science in the Administration of Criminal Justice from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



**Tammy Williams, MBA**

Broker, Sales Associate, REALTOR®  
Berkshire Hathaway Home Services/Fox & Roach REALTORS®

**Views on Progress Achieved toward Eliminating Stigma**

“I believe New Jersey has been making steady progress over time, with increased policies and overall awareness. I believe New Jersey is a leader with an intentional, statewide and local focus on stigma reduction,” Kiah said.

“More and more people are talking about mental health, and perhaps more, attending therapy and sharing that they are doing this,” Brian commented. “No one did this years ago. It’s nice to see this progress.”

Monica shared that within the past couple of years, there was a public fight against a mental healthcare facility being built in her town. “It was shocking to hear people being so vocal against it. The situation highlighted how much work there is to do,” she said. “We’ve

# Stigma Council Welcomes New Members

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made progress because of people well-known in society sharing that it's okay to get help," she added, referring to athletes and actors being open about their struggles. "Their shared experiences empower others. There's much value in that," Monica said.

Tammy compared the increases in conversations and resulting decrease in stigma to menopause. "It's now a much more comfortable conversation because we understand that every woman experiences it. We are doing

the same with mental health concerns, helping people feel comfortable seeking help," she said.

Everyone attributed significant progress to increased understanding during and following the COVID pandemic. "Interestingly enough, there seemed to be a major cultural shift that took place after the pandemic. I believe there was a focus prior, but the willingness to discuss mental health seemed to shift, especially with younger generations," Kiah commented. "But, even with that

being said, I don't think this happened by accident, not in New Jersey anyway. It's the result of multiple reinforcing forces working at the same time, this Council being one of them."

"Since pre-pandemic, mental health has become elevated in conversation. It served to normalize the topic and elevate the isolation issue. Conversations increased and mental health issues became accepted," Tammy added.

## Looking Ahead to Having Greater Impact

"I envision the Council evolving from the powerful awareness driver that it is to a transformational force that ultimately reshapes how mental health is understood, discussed and supported across New Jersey. The Council's growing impact isn't just about reducing stigma, but also changing culture," Kiah said.

"Given the loneliness epidemic, the Governor's Council is well positioned to educate the public on the varied ways community can help protect against mental health challenges: Being connected to it, contributing to it, and being needed by it likely are all protective factors against deepening mental health challenges," Brian stated. "It's important for people to share their own experiences on a larger stage and for education to start at a young age."

Monica reinforced the importance of sharing personal experiences. "It's very impactful, especially illustrating how negative experiences were turned around. Preconceived notions can be dispelled when individuals speak up," she stressed.

Further emphasizing this, Tammy highlighted Governor and First Lady Mary Jo Codey. "They took their personal

experience with postpartum depression and elevated it to normalcy. It was an opportunity for people to become aware that it's okay to not be okay, and that we need to allocate resources and look at how we're responding to these issues," she said.

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“ I am delighted to welcome our new Council members. I look forward to working with them to achieve the Council's goals through creative ideas, innovative events and other new initiatives. ”

**Debra L. Wentz, PhD**  
Council Chair



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## Important Messages for Everyone

Education is critical and one part of the equation. “We need to close the gap between awareness and access with continued investment in affordable, culturally competent care. Additionally, we need to address cultural- and community-specific stigma because like most things, stigma is not one size fits all,” Tammy stated.

“Stigma creates distance, and this Council exists to provide support through public education, community partnerships and accessible resources in alignment with New Jersey’s efforts to create a better mental health system,” Kiah stressed.

“Mental health touches all of us, in one way or another. — whether through our own experiences or through someone

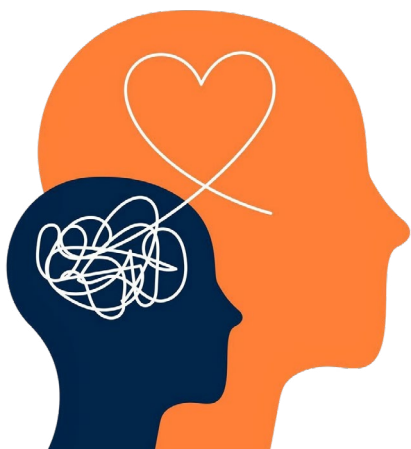
we love, work with or encounter every day, and whether we know it or not,” Kiah stated. “Eliminating stigma isn’t just about changing language; it’s about changing how we see each other and sometimes how we see ourselves.”

“The impact that psychological functioning has on each of us is universal. Everyone is impacted at some time or another by psychological functioning: either by their own, their children and other loved ones’, or their friends’. Therefore, keeping mental health as a community focus is essential for destigmatizing mental illness,” Brian said.

“Erasing stigma is critical for having healthy communities,” Tammy stressed.

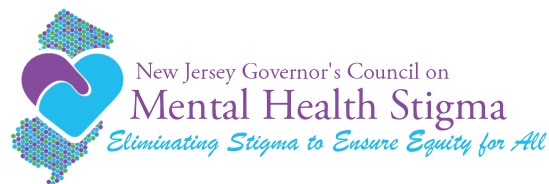
For someone who is currently living with mental health challenges, Kiah stated, “Your experiences are valid, and you are not alone. Seeking help is an act of strength and self-determination. You deserve to be supported, understood and treated with dignity in every space you enter.”

Kiah added for those who do not have a mental illness: “You play a powerful role in shaping the culture around you. The way you listen, speak and respond can either reinforce stigma or help dismantle it. Choosing empathy over judgment, curiosity over assumption, and compassion over silence can make a meaningful difference in someone’s life.”



## Help Eliminate Stigma!

Visit the Stigma Council Website  
for recommendations and resources.



### Share your story

[nj.gov/mhstigmacouncil/news-and-events/share-your-story/index.shtml](https://nj.gov/mhstigmacouncil/news-and-events/share-your-story/index.shtml)



### Sing! for Mental Health Project

[nj.gov/mhstigmacouncil/news-and-events/sing/](https://nj.gov/mhstigmacouncil/news-and-events/sing/)



# First Responders, Family Members' Experiences and Resources Help Fight Stigma and Build Resiliency

"Emotions and emotion regulation are taboo subjects in the first responder community. But, if we don't talk about it, we can't change it," stated Al Bassetti, Director, Emergency Services/Crisis and Employee Assistance Program, Hunterdon Medical Center, during the New Jersey Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma's webinar, *Stronger than Stigma: Mental Health Resources for First Responders*, in February 2026.

"Fortunately, we are much more open and honest," Bassetti added, referring to his observation of increased willingness to discuss and address mental health challenges among first responders. However, as with the overall issue

of stigma, significantly more educational and other initiatives are needed to continue progress toward protecting individuals' mental health and encouraging individuals to practice self-care and seek help when needed.

While everyone requires such education and support, the need is even more acute for first responders. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, approximately 30% of first responders develop mental health conditions. This is significantly higher than the general population, whose prevalence of mental illness is about 20%.

Worldmetrics reported additional statistics about first responders' mental health that underscore the importance of eliminating stigma and increasing access to services and other resources for these individuals. They have a 23% higher risk of dying by suicide compared to the general population; 68% of first responders believe that seeking mental health treatment will negatively impact their career prospects; and only 12% feel safe discussing their mental health with coworkers.

## Elimination of Stigma Can Change these Patterns

A critical component of education and other conversations to fight stigma is correcting false beliefs, such as "needing help is a weakness" and "seeking help means lack of fitness for duty". In addition to concerns about the possible negative impact on careers, fear of judgment overall and of lack of confidentiality also need to be proactively addressed.

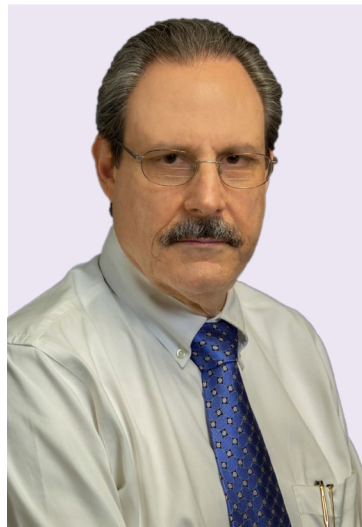
"Leadership is essential to a cultural shift toward acceptance and integration of mental health supports," stated Irena Guberman, EdM, LPC, NCC, Director, Call Center Operations, National Center

for Peer Support, Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care (UBHC), during the February webinar.

"We need to normalize help seeking because early support leads to less burnout, substance use, career impact

and crisis, and confidential services increase utilization and resilience," Dr. Guberman added.

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“Emotions and emotion regulation are taboo subjects in the first responder community. But, if we don't talk about it, we can't change it.”

**Al Bassetti**

Director, Emergency Services/Crisis and Employee Assistance Program  
Hunterdon Medical Center

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## Peer Support Is Effective Both Live and through Digital Therapeutics

As in all areas of mental health care, peers — those who have experienced and, in many cases, are still experiencing mental health challenges — play important roles for eliminating stigma. Since they have true empathy, they are highly effective in encouraging individuals to begin and continue treatment; and therefore, fostering recovery.

As part of the National Center for Peer Support, Rutgers UBHC operates 15 peer support lines (e.g., Cop2Cop) staffed with individuals from specific populations — various types of first responders, as well as other unique groups such as parents of children with special needs — to give individuals in the same types of roles and situations complete understanding, which allows for crises to be de-escalated and, as a result, lives to be saved and quality of life to be significantly improved.

Separate from Rutgers UBHC's help-lines, the principles and evidence of peer support were also put to effective use by GoMo Health® in its digital therapeutics. One example is the First Responders Resiliency program. In fact, a former law enforcement officer and a former spouse of a state trooper used their experiences and full understanding to create messages that are provided to first responders and their families through this program.

Gary Pollack, Senior Vice President at GoMo Health, was a transit cop, serving “people at their lowest points and in the worst situations in the worst cities of the world” for 20 years. “The

First Responders Resiliency program is a proactive tool to help first responders and their families,” he said.

For first responders, this digital support program fosters constant focus on mental health with tailored messages, including wellness screenings, self-care tips and links to resources, as well as 24/7 access to care teams through a secure chat function. It also



**Gary Pollack**  
Senior Vice President  
GoMo Health

notifies first responders' clinicians when they need to intervene to prevent or address crises, and connects individuals to resources such as the Cop2Cop peer support line and employee assistance programs, as automatically determined based on the clients' responses to questions in the messages.

The GoMo Health team spoke with chiefs and first responders online to understand the individuality of differ-

ent types of first responders — not only cops, but also firefighters, emergency medical technicians and dispatchers.

“This program is designed to help immediately and proactively by helping people navigate everything that affects them every day, dealing with issues like their daughter being bullied or anything else and when they have to go from 0 to 60 immediately in response to an emergency call at any time,” Pollack explained.

The program is also available for first responders' family members to use. It sends different messages tailored to help them understand what the first responders are experiencing and enable them to help their loved ones, as well as themselves. For example, advice includes how to manage when their family members cannot be with them during holidays or attend children's birthday parties, plays and sports events.

After trust is clearly established, as evidenced by individuals' consistent use of the program, screening tools to gauge mental health status, as well as alcohol and other drug use, are sent periodically. “It's self-reflecting. No one will think they drink or yell at their kids too much until someone asks them about it. The GoMo tool makes people stop, breathe, think and take positive steps to protect and strengthen their mental health,” Pollack explained.

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# First Responders, Family Members' Experiences and Resources Help Fight Stigma and Build Resiliency

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"This program empowers people to use the information in the moment it's needed most," said Deena Cohen, MPA, CADC, CTTS, WTS, Director of Community Affairs and Development at GoMo Health, who was married to a NJ State Trooper for 17 years.

"If I had GoMo tools back then, I would have understood my husband as a first responder, and I would have had the tools to speak with and support him," Cohen shared. "I also would have had support for what my kids and I were going through." For example, when her husband came home from work, everyone had to be quiet. "It's hard to keep young kids and dogs quiet. We had to walk on eggshells," she said.

"What we designed is unique. It's about prevention and nurturing, not crisis," Cohen said.

Cohen also explained that this program is not an app; it's a web-based platform. Additional distinctions are that the GoMo program is not cumbersome to use, unlike apps that users need to scroll through to find what they need.

By contrast, since GoMo's web-based platform sends messages constantly, it is easy to locate a recent message and through that, access meditation and other resources, and connect to support groups in their local areas.

"In a crisis, no one will think to use an app," Cohen stated.



**Deena Cohen, MPA, CADC, CTTS, WTS**  
Director of Community Affairs and Development  
GoMo Health

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FIRST RESPONDERS AND THEIR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS

*The following helplines are operated by Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care:*



NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
**PEER SUPPORT**  
833-727-5463



888-425-8365  
Mental health support for NJ  
correctional and civilian staff  
working for the New Jersey  
Department of Corrections



888-653-5367



866-Cop2Cop  
(866-267-2267)



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## Advice for First Responders and Those Who Care about Them

Both Cohen and Pollack shared that first responders insulate themselves with social circles limited to other first responders. “They assume no one else understands what they experience and they protect themselves from the outside world with an insular lifestyle,” Cohen said. This also applied to her and other spouses. For example, social life for Cohen and her husband was primarily with other State Troopers and their families.

“Cops create bonds with other cops; they have each other’s backs,” Pollack shared. “There’s a lot of isolation, though. I lost a lot of secular friends. Our attitude was ‘us against them’ even though we were protecting them.”

Pollack pointed out that this was before the anti-police issue. The negative view of law enforcement officers that recently became more widespread is likely making the situation even more difficult for cops and their families — meaning cops are probably even more inclined to limit their social lives to fellow officers.

However, he recommended that first responders socialize “outside of their boxes”. For example, by volunteering at a food pantry, they would see people who are poor; may realize other difficulties they may have, such as substance use; and as a result, be able to “better help them as first responders,” according to Pollack.

Such volunteer experiences can be especially helpful for “older generation first responders, who are less likely to be in touch with what the real world is going through,” according to Cohen.

Pollack also shared sound advice that applies to everyone, not just first responders and their families: Don’t let things fester; be involved with your families as much as you can; have an outlet, such as a sport or other hobby; and use resources, such as those listed below and on page 10, in addition to [GoMo Health’s First Responders Resiliency Program](#) and mental healthcare professionals.

### Under the Office of the NJ Attorney General:

#### NJ Office of the Attorney General’s Office of Alternative and Community Responses

Includes the Officer Resilient Program; ARRIVE [Alternative Responses to Reduce Instances of Violence and Escalation] Together; and NJ CARES [Coordinator for Addiction Responses and Enforcement Strategies].

### Also under the Attorney General:

**Operation Helping Hand** Similar to ARRIVE Together, specifically for interactions with people with substance use disorders

**New Jersey Mental Health Diversion Program** Helps people get connected to treatment and avoid incarceration.

**New Jersey Office of the Attorney General’s Resiliency Program Officer (RPO) program** Provides resiliency training for all New Jersey law enforcement officers; a statewide Chief Resiliency Officer trains RPOs and ensures that all officers have access to the latest resources and trainings.



**Jennifer Davenport**

New Jersey Attorney General

### Other Resources:

**Crisis Intervention Team-NJ Center of Excellence** Training for police officers, mental health professionals and advocates to eliminate stigma and provide a safer and more effective response to people with mental illnesses who are in crisis (A program of Legacy Treatment Services funded by the New Jersey Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services)

**First Responder/First Responder Family Support Resources** Includes online support meetings and links to additional crisis resources (FRSN is a non-profit organization based in San Rafael, California.)



New Jersey Governor's Council on  
**Mental Health Stigma**  
*Eliminating Stigma to Ensure Equity for All*

## **Mission**

The mission of the Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma is to combat mental health stigma as a top priority in New Jersey's effort to create a better mental health system. Through outreach and education, the Council will send a message that mental health stigma must no longer be tolerated.

## **Council Members**

Debra L. Wentz, PhD

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David Jacobs

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