

August 16, 2023

NJ Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma Celebrates Stigma-Free Zones, Honors Individuals for their Contributions and Impact

“When stigma does not exist, individuals are much more likely to receive the support they need to recognize the possibilities in their lives and to work to make them their realities. Through educational programs in communities, schools and other settings, we can make a life-changing impact, and such an effect has been achieved by Stigma-Free Zones in several communities, as well as colleges, throughout the state,” said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, Chair of the New Jersey Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma, during the Council's event, *Luncheon and Ambassador Awards: Celebrating Stigma-Free Zones*, on August 16, 2023. Dr. Wentz also serves as President and CEO of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies and Executive Director of the New Jersey Mental Health Institute.

As the Council is housed in and supported by the New Jersey Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS), Assistant Commissioner Valerie Mielke, MSW, addressed the group. She thanked the Council members for “dedicating time specifically to address issues related to stigma” and expressed her “deepest gratitude to this year's awardees, for their impact not only on how individuals are perceiving mental illnesses, but also on how they are receiving services.” She also acknowledged the honorees' effectiveness in influencing the development of policies that support access to mental health services, for which elimination of stigma is essential.

Susan Tellone, RN, BSN, MSN, CSN, Council Member and Co-chair of the Council's Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee, presented an introduction to the panel discussion with Stigma-Free Zone Ambassadors. “Stigma keeps people from seeking help. We have to do everything in our power to make sure youth and adults know they can seek help. Every small step in fighting stigma is a bigger step in getting individuals to seek and receive the support they need,” said Tellone, who also serves as Clinical Director at the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide.

The discussion was moderated by Council Member and Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee Co-chair Amy Spagnolo, PhD, who also serves as Associate Professor, Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions at the Rutgers School of Health Professions. Dr. Spagnolo recognized the panelists' “passion and commitment to eliminating stigma” and their “dedication over the past year to developing the first Stigma-Free Zone Learning Collaborative, which we plan to grow with more sessions and resources, as well as many initiatives throughout the state.”

The panelists shared the greatest successes and rewards, as well as lessons learned, from creating Stigma-Free Zones. These individuals were then honored with *Stigma-Free Ambassador Awards*. Below are the panelists/honorees with comments they shared during the panel discussion:

- Cynthia Chazen, Stigma-Free Ambassador, Demarest, NJ: “The Paramus Stigma-Free Initiative proves that grassroots advocacy is a very powerful thing. The greatest success is seeing 11 years later continued interest in grassroots advocacy and many people who want to get involved with this cause.”

- Julie DeSimone, LSW, Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee Member; Director of Community Health, New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute: “We have made the conversation more inclusive. Post-pandemic, there has been a huge appetite for work related to mental health challenges. We need to look to others besides mental healthcare professionals for solutions.”
- Shelby Klein, LSW, Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee Member; Director, Bergen County Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services: “A huge success in Bergen County was revitalizing efforts in the post-COVID world. We held a sticker design contest and all 70 towns participated with hundreds of entries.”
- Pamela A. Major, MA, Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee Member; Founder, Melia Bloom and Interfaith Program Coordinator for Mercy Center’s domestic and sexual violence program: “The greatest success was developing the Monmouth County Stigma-Free Committee. We had a ‘Statue of Liberty’ approach — if you want to come, come — and we had people with mental illnesses and substance use disorders, educators, mayors and many other. It’s still going strong after five years.”
- Mary Ann Uzzi, Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee Member; Founder, Stigma-Free Initiative, Paramus, NJ: “I am so proud that this initiative spread to all Bergen County municipalities and statewide. When we started 11 years ago, so many people suffered in silence and didn’t know where to go. We changed that. The most rewarding part has been hearing personal stories of individuals who were touched by our advocacy.”
- Mark T. Williams, BSN, RN-BC, Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee Member; Chair, Somerset County Stigma-Free Committee; Stigma-Free Ambassador, North Plainfield, NJ: “The greatest reward was my church being honored for its stigma-free initiative. We moved the entire congregation forward to embrace the inherent promise, worth and dignity of every individual.”

Dr. Wentz presented *Outstanding Service to the Governor’s Council on Mental Health Stigma Awards* to Theresa L. Wilson, MSW, LSW, Assistant Regional Coordinator- Northern Region Office, DMHAS, and Shauna Moses, Vice President, Public Affairs and Member Services, NJAMHAA.

During her introduction of the awards part of the event, Dr. Wentz stated, “Buddha said, ‘Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.’ This profound statement exemplifies not only joy and the power of sharing it, but also the Stigma-Free Ambassadors’ ongoing efforts. The light they kindle is the illumination they shed on mental illness in order to break down stigma, and the thousands of candles are the thousands of people — and potentially many more — they are enlightening through their educational programs, community events and other endeavors. They are also inspiring many others to join in this vitally important crusade, breathing more and long-lasting life into our mission and undoubtedly bringing us closer every day to achieving it.”



Panelists left to right: Dr. Amy Spagnolo, Julie DeSimone, Mary Ann Uzzi, Cynthia Chazen, Shelby Klein, Pamela A. Major and Mark T. Williams

To learn more about the Stigma-Free Zone Learning Collaborative and express interest in getting involved, please click [here](#) to complete a brief survey and provide your contact information.

More Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee Members Share Additional Insights

“We need good stories, good energy, inspiration and motivation. Celebrating the amazing things people do is very uplifting. Small changes make a big difference. They spur other people to do small things and spark a ripple effect.” — Susan Tellone, RN, BSN, MSN, CSN, Council Member and Co-chair of the Council’s Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee

“When I learned what the Stigma-Free Zones in New Jersey are doing, I initially thought it was just posting a sign in a town. Then, I learned what it entails, what towns are doing, and I’m amazed by how many people are involved and their enthusiasm.” — Emily Grossman, MA, CPRP, NYCPS-P, Founder, Emily Grossman Peer Life Coaching and Training Services, Council Member and Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee

“Over time, I believe that the greatest impact of Stigma-Free Zones will be the awareness building among the community. This increased awareness can translate to culture change, so people who experience mental health conditions feel supported by their communities and neighbors and are encouraged to seek treatment and support.” — Amy Spagnolo, PhD, Council Member, Stigma-Free Zone Subcommittee Co-chair and Associate Professor, Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions at the Rutgers School of Health Professions.