



Province-Wide Support for Families involved in the Mental Health and Criminal Justice System

The Justice and Mental Health Program, November 2010

In 2007, The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario (SSO) established the Justice and Mental Health (JAMH) Program to meet the needs of families of persons with mental illness who have come into contact with the law. We are pleased to announce that we have helped over ninety families across the province in the last year and our program continues to be a reliable and useful resource to those involved in the justice system. If you or someone you know is having a difficult time coping with their family member's criminal justice involvement or legal situation, the JAMH program may be able to help.

Our program offers support and education to families in a variety of modalities. The ANCRSS (Advocates of the Not-Criminally Responsible Schizophrenia Sufferers) Group, a province-wide e-mail support group for people who have a family member or loved one living with schizophrenia, bipolar or depression, and have come into conflict with the law, is one key support available to families. This group was initiated in 2001 by two family members living with a relative with mental illness and criminal justice involvement and was developed in response to the reality that many families are often left to come to terms with their relative's illness and legal involvement on their own. To date, the group has approximately 25 members who have a loved one who is involved in the forensic and/or criminal justice system due to their illness. ANCRSS provides a confidential and supportive space for members to support each other through the challenges and stigma of their situation and become empowered through education and advocacy on issues surrounding mental health and the law.

Individual and ongoing counseling for families is also offered by the JAMH Program Coordinator on an ongoing and as-needed basis. Families often undergo significant emotional distress and burden when trying to get their relative the help they need and also often hit barriers when trying to navigate the mental health or criminal justice system. Moreover, many families are subject to destabilizing events, traumatic circumstances and, in some cases, severe violence when their relative is living with untreated mental illness, leaving family members confused, lost and in many cases, victimized.

Individual support from staff at the JAMH program is available to help families cope with these unique circumstances and link them to the resources and information they need.

In addition, we have also facilitated the development of *Restoring Hope and Moving Forward: Stories from Families about Coping with the Challenges of Serious Mental Illness*. This resource consists of nine stories, covering a diverse range of experiences. Each story is told from the personal perspective of a family member – a mother, father, husband, daughter and sister – in a close, caring relationship with the individual with a mental illness. Each story provides a background about a person's lived experience, how this experience has impacted them and what they do to try to cope with their circumstances and their relative's illness. If you or someone you know has had a particularly difficult time coping with your family member's experience with mental illness and find it comforting to hear about other's personal experiences, then this resource may be beneficial to you. To access this resource, visit our website at www.schizophrenia.on.ca.

In closing, the SSO also offers regional family educational and support groups for those who have a relative or close friend living with schizophrenia or a psychosis-related disorder. These groups allow for mutual support to families and provide education around topics relevant to families dealing with the mental health and criminal justice system. In May and August 2010, in partnership with The Community Resource Connections of Toronto (CRTC), the Toronto Regional Office offered family information sessions about mental health court and how to navigate the court system. To find out about what is being offered in your region, please contact the regional office closest to your area.

The JAMH program accepts referrals from anyone in the community, including professionals, families and self-referrals. If you are interested in more information or would like to contact us, please phone 1-800-449-6367 or email us at jamh@schizophrenia.on.ca.

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