



Mobile advocates seek to 'unmask' mental illness through gala, awareness walk

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MOBILE, Alabama -- In an effort to help combat the stigma surrounding mental illness and the people affected by it, the Mobile chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness will host its first ever "Unmasking Mental Illness" Gala on Friday, Oct. 12.

The three-hour event begins at 5:30 p.m. at the Mobile Museum of Art in the Grand Lakefront Lobby, and tickets are \$100 per person. The business casual event will feature a silent auction, cocktail reception, hors d'oeuvres, music and a cash bar.

The gala will be followed Saturday by NAMI Mobile's third-annual "Friends and Family Walk" at the University of South Alabama's intramural sports complex. Registration for the walk begins at 7:30 a.m., followed by a brief program at 8:30 a.m. and the walk at 8:45 a.m. Refreshments and entertainment will follow from 9:15 a.m. to 10 am.

Event chair: Proper treatment 'critical'

Former Mayor Michael C. Dow is serving as the two-day celebration's honorary chairman in memory of his mother who, herself, lived with a mental illness, he told NAMI Mobile members in the organization's August newsletter.

"Because of my mother's illness and my father leaving us, I became a ward of the state at the age of 10. When I was 14, my maternal grandfather took me in. Those childhood years were difficult, but something I learned was how critical proper treatment, education and support is for those individuals living with mental illness," Dow wrote in the newsletter.

Proceeds from the gala and walk, he said, will be used to:

- Provide educational and support programs to persons with serious brain disorders and to their families.



Former Mobile Mayor Mike Dow (seen here in 2006) is one of the investors is honorary chairman of NAMI Mobile's inaugural "Unmasking Mental Illness" Gala slated for Friday, Oct. 12, 2012. (Press-Register, staff)

- Support public education programs designed to help eliminate the stigma surrounding severe mental illness.
- Advocate for improved services, housing, rehabilitation and meaningful jobs.
- Advocate for nondiscriminatory and equitable federal, state and private sector policies.

Gov. Robert Bentley's office issued a statement acknowledging "one in four adults will experience a mental health problem in any given year, and more than one in 17 live with a serious, chronic mental illness."

In turn, Bentley said the Alabama Department of Mental Health is joining efforts such as those of NAMI Mobile to celebrate Mental Health Awareness Week during the week of Oct. 17-19. The national observance, sponsored for more than 20 years by the national organization, seeks to increase awareness about mental illness and reduce stigma.

Mental health treatment costs nation \$200 billion annually

According to NAMI Mobile, of all hospital admissions across the nation in 2006, some 22 percent involved patients with mental illness, while the total cost of mental health nationwide is estimated at more than \$200 billion per year.

"Mental illnesses are biological disorders that can affect people of any age, religion, race or income. They are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing," Dow wrote.

Meanwhile, Bentley's statement urged all Alabama residents to remember that mental illnesses are medical illnesses that do not discriminate along political lines. Although it's not a partisan issue, mental illness does "involve and affect economic and budget issues," the statement said, adding, "Since 2012, states have cut mental health services by \$1.6 billion at the same time the need has increased. Unemployed people have been four times more likely to report symptoms of severe mental illnesses than others. Americans who experienced involuntary changes in employment status, such as pay cuts or reduced hours, were twice as likely."

For more facts regarding the prevalence and treatment of mental illness in Alabama, click [here](#).

Access to help is key

Dr. Beverly Bell-Shambley, associate commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health's division of mental Health and substance abuse services, said the good news is that treatment does work and recovery is possible, "but only if people can get access to that treatment," and she said the U.S. surgeon general cites stigma as a "major barrier" to people seeking help in a timely fashion.

"We want people to learn the facts and end myths to help break the stigma – and silence – that too often surround the topic. The more people know, the better they can help themselves or help their loved ones get

the help and support they need. By changing attitudes about mental illness, we can change lives," Bell-Shambley said.

For more information on the "Unmasking Mental Illness" Gala and the "Friends and Family Walk" call the NAMI Mobile office at 251-461-3450 or visit www.namimobile.org.

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