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NAMI may disban; Organization needs leader

by Laura Johnson

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The Jacksonville chapter of a national nonprofit that serves mentally ill people and their families will soon disband unless someone steps up to lead the organization.

Jacksonville's chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI, is at risk of dissolving because chapter president Terry McLemore is moving out of state. She and other NAMI members have sought someone to fill her unpaid position, but to no avail.

"I see such a need in our community and I hate for an organization like this one to close," McLemore said. "People just don't know how to access the system and NAMI is a link."

NAMI helps the mentally ill and their families access health care and community programs to help cope with and overcome illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

The Jacksonville chapter of NAMI helps local residents connect with support groups, local physicians and public health resources, McLemore said. NAMI has helped local people find help as they rebound from attempted suicide, has helped parents obtain assistance for their children and it has sought answers for people grappling with schizophrenia.

Local NAMI chapters, including the Jacksonville chapter, also help the community by offering programs designed and produced by the state and national levels of the organization. Without a local chapter, local people don't have access to those programs, such as "Basics," which was designed to help parents with children suffering from mental illness, said Wanda Laird, executive director of NAMI Alabama.

Tonight the organization will meet at 6 p.m. in the community room behind K.L. Brown Funeral Home on Alabama 204. The meeting, which is usually held for community outreach, will be held to discuss business and the possibility of disbanding.

"This will be our last meeting if significant support, interest and leadership are not generated," a release from the organization states.

In addition to having a chapter president in McLemore, the local chapter has a board of directors and about 100 members "past and present." Currently the organization has 25 active members, she said.

"A lot of them have quit," McLemore said. "It's ending."

Members, who pay annual dues, receive information published by NAMI at the

state and national levels. The organization reached out in emails to its community partners, though no one has shown an interest in stepping into McLemore's role.

"We don't think there is anyone within the membership that's really able to do it," McLemore said. "Most of us still have to work regular jobs."

State NAMI leaders are already planning to help serve local residents in case the Jacksonville chapter folds, Laird said. They are asking local members to join NAMI's Centre chapter and are planning for a new Gadsden chapter of NAMI to emerge, she said.

"It's very unfortunate and we regret it," Laird said. "We're trying to help pick up the slack in these other areas."

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