A NOTE FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Awareness, Acceptance and Advocacy

Throughout history, mental illness was viewed as a form of religious punishment, possessed by evil or demonic spirits. Family members who suffered from mental illness were shunned by society, humiliated, and tormented. Apart from that families encountered great adversities in health care as treatment of mental illness was misunderstood. It was certainly a sad time in our nation’s history and for the humanity of all involved. But by the mid-1840s, activists became aware of the unhealthy and deplorable conditions the mentally ill patients had to live and lobbied for better humanitarian treatment. In our modern age, the mental health care system has changed from institutional patient care system to community-based programs, where patients received care, education, and medical treatments. All of this being said, many would like to think that in our era, we have grown and understand mental illness more and how to treat it more effectively. This is great news to be aware of the illness which leads to understanding it.

Acceptance is another aspect individuals and families still strive to achieve after all these years of progress in the health care system. It relates back to the stigma of being mentally ill or having someone in your family who has mental health disorder. Unfortunately the stigma of this illness still prevails over the person/child and family. Acceptance becomes difficult and it is the unspoken secret. However, many families today are willing to speak more openly about their child or loved ones with mental health or behavioral concerns. Those are the parents and family members who have become Advocates!

Advocates are able to support those with mental health and behavioral needs in many ways. AFN helps parents to advocate for their children and for their own needs in order to move the family forward. In our journey to support the families, AFN is learning and teaching parents to approach their challenges with vitality. There are many ways to advocate and it can be through the Child Serving Systems, Behavioral Health, Education, Children, Youth & Families and Juvenile Justice. There is political advocacy where we can educate, share and encourage our State Representatives to reform the policies that affect families who have mental challenges.

Awareness: my loved one has a disorder/illness and I will get educated and understand it to eliminate isolation and fear.

Acceptance: this is the reality in my life and I will support the dreams of my loved one.

Advocacy: I will work to change attitudes of mental illness, change policy to help my loved one be as productive as possible and to stamp out STIGMA.

We have come a long way, so never lose HOPE. Let’s try to reverse the way the world views mental illness by Awareness, Acceptance, and Advocacy. Together we can trample the grip of STIGMA!!!

Ruth Fox
AFN CEO
The Impact of Advocacy, a Parent’s Perspective

When my children and I moved to Wilkinsburg I didn’t know anything about the community. Fortunately I already had my daughter’s family based team and they helped me find an after-school program and other resources. I was overwhelmed and confused when my daughter started having trouble at school. This was after she had been re-evaluated and her IEP updated. She had been given a different diagnosis that I did not agree with. I wasn’t sure why and how it changed.

I tried to speak with the school district but they did not listen to me. I was referred to an education advocate who showed me the correct steps and actions to take to make sure my daughter’s educational needs were met and my voice was heard.

For my young son I found the Wilkinsburg Family Support Center. They work with 0-5 years old children. A food pantry and a summer program for him was a bonus. This allowed me to work on some projects during my free time. I met a woman who took me under her wings, introducing me to all the programs and meetings the Family Center had to offer. I can honestly say that if it wasn’t for Ms. Elaine asking me to attend advocacy, the Family Support Center had to offer. I can honestly say that I was referred to an education advocate who showed me the correct steps and actions to take to make sure my daughter’s educational needs were met and my voice was heard.

I then got involved with Allegheny Family Network and began to work with the Joint Planning Team. I had a Family Support Partner I could call and my daughter had a Youth Support Partner to talk to. My JPT Facilitator made sure the school was on the same page as the rest of my team. Things finally began to settle down for my daughter.

This progression of the people who came into my life to advocate for me and my children, led me to become the President of the Parent Council. I was excited to have the opportunity to have my voice heard, making suggestions, and changes at the Center.

I was further encouraged to speak at a rally in front of the PA State Capitol during a Family Centers Legislative Week. Even though I was scared I knew the importance of advocacy and I wanted our Legislators to know how important the Family Centers are and how it impacted my family. I spoke the following year also!

When I look back remembering sitting at school meetings with my Family Support Partner, crying and scared to speak up, to where I am now, I realize the importance of having had people advocate for me. I remember calling my education advocate and my JPT team telling them I was ready to take on the School District for the bus not picking up my daughter for school. Without tears, and with my voice firm and sure, I then knew all the trainings, meetings, advocacy I was given made me strong. I was the President of the Parent Council at WFSC for two years and now I have been a member Policy Board since last year. I became an AFN Parent Advisory Board Member, and with more support and advocacy from staff, I applied for a job at AFN and I am now a Family Support Partner helping other parents find their voices and learning how to advocate.

I was excited to have Hank Lipinski, AFN Director of Development and other resources.

Nikki McCoy, FSP

Community Foundation Helps AFN’s Advocacy Thrive

On February 20, 2017 Allegheny Family Network was awarded a grant of $5,000 by the Pittsburgh Penguins Foundation to support AFN’s Second Annual Wellness Fair. The Fair will be held in October, and it will feature healthy catering, nutritional books and materials, line dancing, Zumba, massage, health screenings, and a variety of other healthy activities and games.

More than 150 AFN families and children participated in the 2016 Wellness Fair and AFN staff will all be working to increase the number of participants this year.

Information regarding the date and location of the coming event will be available in our next newsletter.

The Board, staff and families of AFN are sincerely grateful to the Pittsburgh Penguins Foundation for their continued support of AFN.

Hank Lipinski, AFN Director of Development

AFN Spring Recruitment Events           NOW HIRING!

Have you raised a child with Mental Health / Emotional or Behavioral Concerns? Do you recognize the need for support for parents with similar experiences? Are you: Energetic & Friendly? Caring & Concerned? Able to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds? Able to work independently or with a team? Then WE WANT TO MEET YOU!

MAY 2 or JUNE 6, 2017 * 4:30 PM – 8 PM

REQUIREMENTS:
- Allegheny Family Network is a family-run organization. Every employee is a Family Member who has raised or is raising a child with mental health / emotional or behavioral challenges.
- Must be able to pass PA State Criminal Background Checks and FBI clearances
- Must have a vehicle, a valid PA driver’s license & be willing to drive in all weather
- Must have basic computer skills

FAMILY SUPPORT PARTNER POSITIONS

The Family Support Partner (FSP) is a full-time, 37.5-hour position with benefits. This person must be a parent or primary decision-maker of a child with mental health, behavioral or emotional concerns. Other qualifications include the ability to document program outcomes in writing or in program systems, be familiar with locations and access to community resources, and be able to effectively negotiate or deal with conflicts and issues.

The FSP will connect parents and families to providers and resources relevant to the services and needs. The FSP works with provider staff to provide information about topics relating to the child’s needs, assist families in prioritizing needs and work with the family as a team to assure positive outcomes. The FSP offers emotional support to families and assists them in preparing families to advocate for themselves and the needs of their child. The FSP also connects families with other families facing similar challenges and may coordinate and help facilitate support groups, if needed.

AFN offers training and weekly assistance and supervision meetings in order to provide the supports the FSP needs to succeed. If you have successfully navigated through school and social services with your child, this is a great position for you!

PARENT COORDINATOR

The Parent Coordinator is a part-time position with 20 – 25 hours per week. The position is based in the North Craig Street office in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh but does require some traveling to various locations in Allegheny County.

The Parent Coordinator will coordinate all requests for parents to sit on committees, policy boards, education involvement, interview panels, and special interests that concern the welfare of families in Allegheny County. This position will coordinate and negotiate for the participation of Lead Parents in strategic settings across Allegheny County. The Parent Coordinator will ensure that families are involved in decisions making and that the parents are trained via the Training Coordinator to effectively participate at the necessary level. The Coordinator also will assist in organizing, scheduling and other details involved with Vendor Events, Fairs and annual AFN-hosted events. This person also will connect with various entities and offices to make resource connections with county, state and national organizations. If you are organized, social, a great multi-tasker and familiar with the resources and events you experienced while raising a child with mental health, behavioral or emotional concerns, this could be the job for you!

Come prepared for an ON-SITE INTERVIEW. Bring a resume and cover letter explaining your experience raising or having raised a child with mental health/emotional or behavioral concerns.

Allegheny Family Network
425 North Craig Street, 3rd Fl, Pittsburgh 15213
Parking available across from building.
Call 412-246-2030 for more information.
www.alleghenyfamilynetwork.org
AFN is very involved in the communities of Allegheny County reaching out to parents across the county who are raising children with mental health, behavioral and emotional needs. Parents also volunteer their time advocating for other parents.

**Accepting the Unexpected—A Parent’s Journey**

“Don’t you hear them?” Those four words turned our family’s world upside down and began a journey into mental illness that I never dreamed we would be taking.

My 13 year old daughter stood before me trembling, trying to get me to hear the angry voices that existed only in her head. My strong fearless child was terrified and there was nothing I could do to comfort her. After countless doctor visits and frightening episodes of angry outbursts from my daughter, a psychiatrist finally gave us a diagnosis—Bipolar Disorder with psychotic features. Not only did she have the ups and downs of depression and mania, but she also heard voices.

This can’t be was my first thought. I never saw this coming. What did I do wrong? After many sleepless nights crying, mourning the loss of the future my daughter would never have, I realized that life had to go on and that my child needed me now more than ever. So I decided to learn as much as I could about mental illness. I took the NAMI Family to Family course, read every book I could find and joined a support group for parents of children with mental illness. I was determined to make sure my “Pumpkin” had the best life possible.

As my daughter got older her needs changed and I needed more resources. I realized that no one was going to fight for her like I would. Using my connections, calling in favors and sometimes getting a bit angry, I learned how to navigate the system and advocate for my daughter so we could get the things she needed, like an accommodating summer camp and specialized schooling.

Today my daughter is thriving. She works several jobs that she loves, has learned coping skills to deal with the voices and tells everyone that she is a “strong, independent woman”. As her mother, I couldn’t agree more.

**Book Report—STOP That Seemingly Senseless Behavior!**

Sometimes children and adults with autism engage in seemingly purposeless or disruptive behaviors that can negatively impact their education, daily routines, and relationships.

STOP That Seemingly Senseless Behavior! FBA-Based Intervention for people with Autism by Beth A Glasberg, PH.D., BCBA describes how to develop behavior intervention plans to stop or diminish typical problem behaviors such as non-compliance, aggression, and repetitive actions. Parent-friendly and filled with case studies, STOP That Seemingly Senseless Behavior! offers effective, easy-to-implement strategies and techniques (e.g., reinforcement, replacement behaviors, positive behavior supports).

With this book, families and professionals can shape the behavior of children and adults with autism, leading to more productive and inclusive futures.

If you would like to read this book, please speak to your Family Support Partner.
11 Highland Area Community Cabinet—At Risk Youth: Starting a local journalism club for teens in the community. The local library is offering meeting space and computers for the clubs use.
12 Tri-Boro Networking Support Group—Open Forum: Open topics and discussion on where this group is going and what we are doing in supporting each other.
13 Turn it UP Network—Budgeting Garfield Jubilee: How to budget, work on your finances, how to pay your bills on time, and how to get your credit back in tact and be able to purchase a home.
14 Diva Discussions—Women and Self-Worth: The group will discuss women and their self-worth in the present day.
15 Fathers Involved Now, Braddock—What the term ‘Good Father’ means: Looking at our beliefs and values to understand what is a good father. Brainstorming terms and holding ourselves accountable to be a good father.
16 Fathers Involved Now, North Side—Father’s Day Celebration: We will celebrate dads and how important dads are in the lives of their children. Gym Time 6-7pm.
17 Tri-Boro Networking Support Group—Creative Art Box: A time to be creative with learning how to make decorative art boxes. Presented by Aida Walker, AFN Parent Coordinator.
17 Turn it UP Network—Line Dancing: The group will learn a new line dance! Presented by Sarah Hamilton.
18 Dual Discussions—Women and Equality: The group members will discuss the issue of women and equity across the board.
19 Fathers Involved Now, North Side—Father’s Day Celebration: We will celebrate dads and how important dads are in the lives of their children. Gym Time 6-7pm.
19 Tri-Boro Networking Support Group—Creative Art Box: A time to be creative with learning how to make decorative art boxes. Presented by Aida Walker, AFN Parent Coordinator.

May


Fathers Involved Now, North Side—Celebrating the Father of your children: The meeting will focus on the importance of open communication between both parents even if the parents are not able to cohabitate.


TBI: The group will consider what topics they would like topics they would discuss in the coming months.

Foster Parents Support Group—No group in August. Group meets every month. Next group will meet in September.

AFN Family Support Groups and AFN Events Information

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AFN provides child care for parents to be able to attend our support groups. Your RSVP is very important and very much appreciated when attending a support group. Please RSVP to your group’s facilitator. Thank you.