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New campaign targets elimination of stigma around mental illness

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Though she's CEO of Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County and has worked in the field of mental health for most of her career, Marlene Schillinger was taken completely by surprise when her 18-year-old son took his own life seven years ago.

It's only in the past year she's even been able to talk about it publicly, and only after she became involved in the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition. Made up of representatives from 15 area human service providers, the coalition on Tuesday launched a mental health anti-stigma campaign aimed at helping to grow awareness around mental health and reducing stigma.

It was a deeply personal experience for Schillinger.

"I lost a child," she said. "I think that if people were educated around stigma and mental health, there might have been a different outcome. They're not alone and it's preventable. But it's stigma that prevents people from getting help. I have a mental health challenge that I never spoke about and I'm part of an anti-stigma campaign. Why don't I feel comfortable talking about it?"

Using a [website](#), social media and other print/broadcast media, the "Join the Conversation" campaign invites everyone in the community to learn more and share their experiences. There should be plenty of participants: One in five Americans, including children, adults and seniors, has a diagnosable mental health challenge, but 40 percent never seek help because they're afraid it will jeopardize their relationships or their job.

"Who knows what my son could have done if someone had tried to save his life," Schillinger said. "If I can't share it, then I have no business being part of an anti-stigma coalition. It was that group that gave me the support to stand up, to join the conversation."

The idea for the coalition came from the Fellows Action Network, created by the Health Foundation of Western and Central New York, who were tasked in June 2015 with creating a community project. It grew to include 15 agencies, with a research study later funded by \$10,000 in seed funding from the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation. A five-year plan was developed last fall, with funds committed this February



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"The whole issue of mental illness is the stigma that keeps so many people away from getting the help that they need," said Max Donatelli of the campaign to deal with mental health issues.

by the Erie County Department of Mental Health to begin creative development. A major grant followed this month by the Patrick P. Lee Foundation, which made a three-year, \$300,000 commitment.

It's an issue that affects just about everyone, regardless of income or social status, said Mark Poloncarz, Erie County Executives, who cited the recent suicide death of Soundgarden frontman Chris Cornell.

"We must work together as a community to get that message out, that it is okay to ask for help, that you should ask for help," he said. "We need to eliminate that stigma that has unfortunately bedeviled too many people for too long, who are afraid to ask for help."

Chairman of the coalition is Max Donatelli, a retired executive from Baker Victory Services and an active member with the Developmental Disabilities Association of Western New York.

"The whole issue of mental illness is the stigma that keeps so many people away from getting the help that they need," he said. "Somebody wouldn't go with a broken leg for 10 years, but many people go with a mental illness without getting treated for 10 years and sometimes longer because they're afraid of what people will say or they're afraid of admitting they need help."

Foundation executives from Tower and Lee said the anti-stigma idea fits perfectly with the areas of mental health they both support.

"Obviously stigma is a huge barrier to people receiving treatment and services," said Jane Mogavero, executive director at the Lee Foundation, which just last year refined its focus to the areas of education and mental health, specifically around raising awareness of mental illness. "This was very fortuitous and our friends at Tower helped us learn about the coalition and what was going on."

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