



“Family to Family”

VA Program Supports Family Caregivers of Veterans with Severe Mental Illness

*The free 12-week course, open to families & friends of Veterans
with severe mental health problems, begins March 27th*

Syracuse VA continues its “NAMI Family-to-Family Education Program” designed specifically for family caregivers of Veterans with severe mental illness. More than 100,000 family members from across the country graduated from the program first developed and implemented by NAMI (National Association on Mental Illness).

VA classes are held each week for twelve weeks, beginning March 27th from 6-8pm and are taught by trained family members and guided by VA professional behavioral health counselors. The course is taught twice each year with additional programs available to meet the needs of Veteran families.

The program developed by NAMI and in working with VA, specifically targets the Veteran population and highlights issues specific to Veterans and their families.

Course offers current information about mental health issues including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and many additional disorders.

The new PTSD Chapter of the Program expands on this information and gives families more in-depth description of the disorder, how it is treated, and support, VA provides to the Veteran. VA has an entire Team who are devoted to treating this specific disorder.

Further, “Family to Family provides up-to-date information about medications, side-effects, and strategies for medication adherence. Current research related to mental health is provided and family members will gain empathy by understanding the subjective, lived experience of a person with mental illness. The course provides learning opportunities for problem solving, listening, and communication techniques. Also, strategies for handling crisis and relapse prevention are taught. Finally, the course focuses on caring for the caregiver, coping with worry, stress, and emotional overload. Referrals to local agencies for additional supportive services and a review of the VA system and how to access VA services conclude the course.

Goals of the Program: The overall goal of the NAMI Family-to-Family VA course is to educate family members and friends about mental health issues, reduce stigma, and provide support. By supporting family members and friends, we can provide better care to our Veterans as they will likely be able to access services faster, have firmer supports, and family may recognize crisis symptoms sooner, allowing us to help faster.

Why the Need: *Large numbers of Veterans are returning from combat.* With that comes a population of loved ones who need additional support. We are their first line of defense by being proactive and helping family

members to access care for their loved ones. We listen, we help, we care, and we empower families to reduce the burden of mental illness on the family through learning

Openings for the 12-week course are available right now; instruction is free of charge.

To enroll, please contact Ann Canastra, Syracuse VA Behavioral Health Family Support and Education Coordinator at 425-4445, extension 51009 or by e-mail: Ann.Canastra@va.gov.

****Media Note:** Ms. Canastra and family members, enrolled in the course, are available for interviews.

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