

NAMI opens chapter offering help on NMSU campus

LAS CRUCES >> The new year has seen no reduction in school shootings nationwide — there was even one in New Mexico earlier this month — or much of a solution to the stigma still surrounding mental illness.

But NMSU students will be more hands-on in the fight to combat such issues beginning in February with a new student-led chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

NAMI, a grassroots organization, started in 1977 to provide support, advocacy and education to families and people affected by mental illness, said Pamela Field, part of NAMI-Doña Ana County, who will be a liaison for the student group.

"NAMI on Campus is a new thing happening across the country," she said. "So many mental illnesses begin to develop in the late teens and early '20s, so hopefully we will meet the needs of people in those age groups on campus."

Last summer, Field said she went to the national NAMI conference in San Antonio, Texas, where she received information about NAMI on Campus and mentioned it to Ruth Burkhart, an assistant professor of nursing at NMSU who will be the faculty adviser.

Beginning last semester, Burkhart made attending a NAMI-DAC meeting a requirement for her psychiatric mental health nursing class.

"They (students) came back to me and said, 'We had no idea that people were suffering like this. We need to do something,'" she told members of the local NAMI board at a recent meeting.

After giving a presentation last fall, NAMI on Campus NMSU received its charter and will officially kick off with events next month, joining about 180 colleges across the country.

NAMI on Campus has 11 members and hopes to address the mental health needs of students — with everything from anxiety to suicidal thoughts — and to raise mental health awareness providing peer support, developing strong ties with counseling centers, providing information on local resources that help with mental health conditions, promote early detection, and advocate for more services on campus that help their mission, according to a statement on the charter page of the NMSU website.

NAMI on Campus president and nursing student, Yvonne Aguilera, said multiple counseling and wellness-based entities on campus and in the community have already reached out to lend support.

"It's nice to meet other contacts and resources in the community," she said. "We're excited about establishing ourselves and just finding resources and ways of sharing information and making those contacts in the community and on campus."

Aguilera said the national NAMI on Campus organization has provided some ready-made information, like presentations and fliers, that the group will be handing out on campus and at NMSU basketball games.

Jennifer Greene, vice president and nursing student, said initial events include a movie night with the showing of a mental health movie followed by a discussion, as well as possibly handing out "stress buster" kits during finals week, and having fun activities.

"We have been talking to people about getting resources and what is available for those in need," Greene said. "A lot of those in need are on campus. We have a large majority of the age group where we have this onset of mental illness."

The new organization will be the only NAMI on Campus in New Mexico, and will also have a presence at NMSU's sister campus, Doña Ana Community College, Burkhart said. One of her goals as the faculty adviser is to see the movement catch on at campuses throughout the state, as well as raise awareness to the greater NAMI organization and its myriad services.

The new group hopes to gather all of its resources not only to help students with mental illnesses, but also students who have family members with mental illness who may not know about the local resources available to them and to their families. It will also be a good resource for students battling problems like addiction, Burkhart said.

"What's so exciting about this is there are a lot of older people in NAMI and the fact that there's going to be young people with new ideas and energy, it's going to help," Field said.

Up next for the greater county organization, Field said, is beginning a NAMI-DAC on the east side of the county and helping those communities.

For more information about NAMI on Campus, email yaguiler@nmsu.edu or burkhart@nmsu.edu, or call 575-646-5806. Visit the county NAMI site at nami-dac.org.

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