

NORTHERN LAKES COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH

CONSUMER ADVOCACY COUNCIL

VOTER REGISTRATION AND LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY Tom Masseau of Michigan Protection and Advocacy

July 9, 2008

Guest Presenter: Tom has worked since 1987 in the capacity of Director of Government and Media Relations. He provides strategic direction and leadership on public policy efforts at the State and Federal levels and presents their position to the legislators and congress.

Tom distributed folders with information regarding Michigan Protection and Advocacy. Tom noted that Michigan Protection and Advocacy (P&A) is private non-profit agency statewide organization who advocates for individuals with disabilities on all levels from policy, abuse and neglect, employment and education. Tom handles all the policy and legislative issues and voting activities.

Voting Issues

Tom identified that back in 2002 the Help America Vote Act was passed in Congress and as a result the Federal government has given a small amount of money to all of the states to provide advocacy on voting issues. They work with the clerks, advocacy groups and voters with disabilities to make sure they understand their rights to vote, understand that polling places must be accessible, and individual requests for accommodation are supported. They work closely with the Secretary of State and the Bureau of Elections to make sure the polling places are accessible. In Traverse City the polling places are accessible for the most part. Disability Network of Northern Michigan worked with the local clerk two years ago and did a polling place assessment. The state had grants available for the clerks for polling place modifications and they could be reimbursed for those made. He just came from the Grand Traverse Heritage Center and the fire station on Front Street and it appears visually they all look good. He will be checking other locations to make sure they are accessible for individuals with disabilities.

Tom responded to a question whether he helps people who are out of the military. He noted they provide information and referral. If someone is overseas they can help someone get an absentee ballot. Once an individual is registered to vote they provide the Secretary of State an address to get a voter's registration card. If they are overseas, in service or on a base they will need to contact the clerk and a ballot will be mailed to them because that is their place of voter registration. If the individual does not return to their normal living situation they will need to contact the local clerk's office and change their address.

Tom identified that this year they are working on voter education outreach. They are working and designing trainings and are focusing on the state psychiatric hospitals and Mt. Pleasant Center making sure the individuals are all registered to vote. They will be providing a week long training so that people understand the process of voting and their right to vote. They are also working with clubhouses and drop-in centers statewide making sure people are registered to vote. If they are not registered currently they missed the deadline to register to vote in the primary on

August 5. You have to be registered 30 days prior to the date of election to vote. He encouraged people to get registered and will then be able to vote in the general election.

P & A is putting together a voting DVD that they will be providing to all disability groups, CMH's, clubhouse, drop-in, etc. It will be broken into three stages: how to get registered to vote, voting process, rights to vote and making sure you understand individuals can't be denied the right to vote, photo ID requirements, history of disability movement. It will be a 30 minute DVD and will be broken into chapters and you can click on the area of interest. The DVD will be available in September and P&A will be sending out free of charge. The DVD will be closed captioned and will be 100% accessible.

They are doing everything they can to make sure people understand their rights to vote. As long as they are 18, a resident of the State and not currently in prison you can vote. They are trying to get the message out to folks. Even if they don't have a photo ID or State ID when they go to the polls they can still vote but just need to sign a statement of who you are. They are putting out a Disability Vote newsletter which will go to everyone on their mailing list.. They are still working with polling places and if you encounter any polling places in the primaries that are not accessible let them know so they can work to get it done.

Another new activity is the 211 system that is available in the southern part of the state. The system in the northern area uses the 800# and are gearing up for the 211 system. During the election season if someone has questions about voting they can call the 211 or 800# and all the questions about voting would be answered. They are also surveying transportation companies around the State to find out what transportation options are available that are needed on election day. They will try to make the process much easier so people know what is happening and what their rights are.

Tom identified he brought voter registration forms for individuals to complete and can mail and send to the clerk's offices. He noted that CMHs can register people to vote as well as Michigan Works, Michigan Rehabilitation Services, etc.

Legislative Activity

Rights Protection:

Tom identified that Michigan Protection and Advocacy services are focused on rights protection and that people understand what rights are entitled to them. They are working on policy initiatives that would dramatically change the recipient rights system and in their opinion it would improve the system. Back in 2004 the Mental Health Commission provided recommendations on ways to improve the mental health system. They are building on those recommendations looking at ways to end the cycle if an individual files a recipient rights claim ending the cycle of the loop. If you file a complaint it should be resolved in a matter of six months. They are working with some other individuals and have a bill that is waiting to get introduced that will highlight those issues and are advocating that the State Office of Recipient Rights be removed from Department of Community Health and that it become its own agency. That is one of the recommendations as well as the local level. An additional change would be at the local level to move the reporting to the State office. They understand it is a touchy issue but they are trying to get all parties at the table to talk about the issue. How can they all come together to make the system user friendly

and that it protects the individuals rights. It is perfectly okay to have a different opinion. The biggest issue is moving the State Office of Recipient Rights to some other entity within State government and having the local Office of Recipients removed from the local CMH and report to the State Office of Recipient Rights to streamline the whole system. They would also look at the appeals process, putting some timelines in place so an individual doesn't have to wait. There are some financial penalties for the CMH if they don't report in a timely manner so the recipient rights system has a financial tool to fine the CMH a certain percentage of their administrative budget to fix the problem. It strengthens the system, holds people accountable and makes the system more user friendly in their view. The legislation will be sponsored either in July or September.

There are 14 bills that have been introduced on the House side that were built on the Mental Health Commission recommendations. Some of those bills look at creating a separate Department of Mental Health and another bill looks at service priority based on diagnosis. There is also a bill that would limit the number of CMH's from 46 to 18.

Other legislature being considered is: allowing a family member or spouse to request copies of an individuals mental health records after death; Office of Recipient Rights Director to report to the Department of Community Health Director; trying to prevent stigma. Interested parties can come together to discuss changes and then they will go to committee. They are hoping the bills will move forward to be completed by December because the main sponsors are term limited.

Tom provided a summary of the bills and a list of the legislators in our area. He noted it will be up to us to educate the candidates on mental health issues. He encouraged everyone to ask them where they stand on mental health parity and mental health issues in general.

Mental Health Parity

Tom identified that a statewide coalition has been working to pass mental health parity that would provide some form of mental health treatment insurance for everyone. He noted the issue is getting some movement at the federal level. Tom noted that at the State level it hasn't been as well received. It has been opposed by several groups and they have been encouraging folks to contact their members letting them know the pros and cons. Mental Health Parity has been going on for many years and every time we talk to legislators they understand the issue but businesses are coming out against saying their health care premiums will sky rocket. Michigan Protection and Advocacy has been showing that the premiums will increase only by 1%. There are approximately 42 other states that have Mental Health Parity. That is one of the recommendations by the Mental Health Commission. They are encouraging people to share their stories identifying how that would help them.

Other issues discussed:

1. Invite candidates (all parties) to see where they stand on the issues. Attend clubhouses as well. Invite senators even though they are not running this year and share our concerns to see where they stand on the issues. It is important to start relationships early. Reach out to the candidates when there is a major event happening and invite to the council and drop-ins so they have the issues that people face. Reach out to candidates asking them their platform with disabilities on the

- statewide level as well as the district. Identified candidates who are running for offices.
2. Friend was in prison and was told they couldn't vote. Tom noted that anyone can vote as long as they are not currently serving time in prison.
 3. It is your right to get information from the Clerk's Office to provide the information to register to vote. Can also go to the specific precinct to get a form to register to vote.
 4. If you mail the voter's registration form in you would need to provide some form of ID the first time you vote.
 5. Charter on Demand (Want More) has information on the candidates and their background. The Library has the ballots for the primary. The League of Women Voters (local chapters) will be putting together their voter guides and will be available mid-July.
 6. Everyone has the right to vote and it is the individual's choice. If your 18 you can vote. No one can question who you vote for or whether you are competent to vote. It is important to provide as much information as possible so they understand the issues.
 7. Mental health parity is not well received in the State because of financial issues. Benefits are identified as: premiums will only go up about 1%, sick days are reduced because they can get the coverage for mental health treatment.
 8. If your registered to vote you can change your address at any time.
 9. Everyone should have picture ID to be able to vote. As individuals leave psychiatric facilities or group homes they may not be able to attain their birth certificate. The Secretary of State's office may possibly be able to waive the fee to get your State ID. It was noted that in Wayne County you need a birth certificate and your mother's maiden name to register to vote.
 10. The Senate bill on mental health parity is totally different than the House version. There is a whole list of parity issues and everyone must be able to come together to be on the same page.
 11. The Voter DVD's can be reproduced and can be placed on our website. P & A is running a Name the DVD Contest to spur some interest.
 12. Third Level Crisis Intervention Center in Traverse City provides emergency services for the Northern area CMH programs. They have been gearing up and gathering information for the 211 system that will link with Muskegon.
 13. Encourage the Clerk's to come out to assist and answer questions. Possibly have a voter registration day. Individuals will need to know their precincts or the Clerks can assist. If there are problems contact P & A. Invite the Clerk's to the clubhouses or drop-in centers.

14. Encouraged individuals to vote by absentee ballot before the election (can also vote in person).

15. Transportation to vote – Kandu Island and Club Cadillac have vans and could take people to vote. Suggested using the wheelchair van also. Transportation authorities are also an option. Timing is also an issue. Hours of voting is 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

16. To request an absentee ballot you have to be physically unable to get to the polls, over 60 or 62, etc. Request an absentee ballot from the Clerk, it will be mailed to you and can be requested all the way up to 2:00 p.m. the Saturday prior to the election. You can request an emergency absentee ballot up to the same day of the election, it will be mailed to you and then mail back. Plan ahead.

17. Encouraging people to be poll workers. They can make money for working the day. They have the ability to juggle schedules. Contact the Clerk for information. The absentee ballot will be sent to the address provided at the time of the registration.

Tom identified that he would be visiting Kandu Island and Club Cadillac tomorrow. Council members thanked Tom for the presentation.