

July 30, 2008

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

Contact:

Shannon Jaccard, M.B.A.

Communications Director

(619) 584-5564

shannonjaccard@namisd.org

## **Psychiatric patient death in ER waiting room shows stigma still exists in public health system**

NEW YORK - Esmine Green, 49, should not have died the way she did in June on the floor of a Brooklyn psychiatric hospital after collapsing on the ground and reportedly being ignored by staff for nearly an hour.

Green, a psychiatric patient who was involuntarily committed the previous morning had waited overnight for a bed. Based on a hospital surveillance tape, she stopped moving about half an hour after she collapsed. No one came to her aid. Not nurses or doctors or security guards or even other patients around her in the waiting room.

According to a report in the Chicago Tribune, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said he was disgusted by the tape and that the actions of the hospital staff were unacceptable.

"I think what they said is, 'Oh well, people sleep on the floor all the time, and I didn't pay any attention,'" he said. "They shouldn't be sleeping on the floor ... and you should pay attention."

The hospital is under investigation for this and other complaints against it by advocates for those with mental illness. In fact, a state agency, the New York State Mental Hygiene Legal Service, and the New York Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit a year ago, calling the psychiatric center "a chamber of filth, decay, indifference and danger," according to the Chicago Tribune report.

This underscores a larger problem of stigmatization of those with mental illness in the public healthcare system. "It is unfortunate when individuals are seeking help from a place they feel or have been told is 'safe' only to be treated without respect and dignity," said Shannon Jaccard, Communications Director with the National Alliance on Mental Illness in San Diego (NAMI San Diego). "Waiting 24 hours for care is just one of many examples of inequality when it comes to treating and believing in recovery of individuals with mental health challenges."

In 2008, the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) released a survey that indicates emergency psychiatric care is "extremely limited" and "getting worse."

- Over 60% of psychiatric patients needing admission to a hospital have to stay in the emergency department over 4 hours after a decision to admit them has been made.
- 33% wait over 8 hours; 6% over 24 hours.
- 62% of emergency department medical directors indicated there are no psychiatric services for patient care while patients are boarded prior to admission or transfer.
- 89% transfer psychiatric patients every week to other facilities due to unavailable psychiatric beds at their hospitals.

“Nationwide, we face a mental healthcare system in crisis. It is time for investment and transformation of the mental healthcare system at all levels,” explained Michael J. Fitzpatrick, Executive Director of NAMI National.

The path to this transformation begins on a local level with education, support and advocacy for those who have mental illness. NAMI San Diego offers many educational classes and support groups as well as a helpline. “Our idea is that the more we educate, the less stigma there will be surrounding mental illness which is a huge barrier for individuals with mental illness seeking and receiving treatment,” said Jaccard.

The ‘In Our Own Voice’ program is another of NAMI San Diego’s stigma-busting offerings that features people who have mental illnesses speaking about their experiences going through the five stages of recovery: dark days, acceptance, treatment, coping skills and success, hopes and dreams. It is a powerful presentation that the organization is taking to San Diego hospitals, institutions, corporations, churches, schools, crisis centers - basically anywhere they can to get the message out that people can and do live well with mental illnesses and that recovery is possible.

“That really is the message - that even people living with severe mental illness can and do recover. The pathway to this recovery includes hope, choice, empowerment and a public health environment that values all people,” said Jaccard.

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) is a non-profit organization that provides education, support services and advocacy to improve the lives of everyone affected by mental illnesses. Visit [www.namisandiego.org](http://www.namisandiego.org) or call 619-543-1434 or 1-800-523-5933.

###