The ENA 2009 – 11 Strategic Plan identifies practice priorities addressing the issues of crowding/boarding, workplace violence and emergency psychiatric care. To address the issues involving the care of patients with mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders, the Emergency Department Psychiatric Care Committee was formed to:

1. Recommend position statements on legislative and regulatory initiatives addressing emergency care for patients with mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders.
2. Monitor mental health advocacy coalitions on which ENA is a member.
3. Provide articles for ENA Connection.
4. Organize courses and/or activities to raise awareness about issues concerning emergency department care of patients with mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders.
5. Oversee the ENA initiative promoting collaboration between emergency department and community agencies to coordinate mental health services into an integrated system of care.

Linked to the Committee’s fifth charge is the need to educate our constituency about issues facing consumers of psychiatric services. One of those issues is understanding that the emergency department has always been a safety net for all people in our communities, including those with mental illnesses. Another issue concerns the mental health system in the U.S., described as “Kafkaesque,” that is, marked by senseless, disorienting, often menacing complexity (Smith, 2009).

The current mental health care system prevents people with serious symptoms from getting help except when they are in imminent danger of harming themselves or others. A comparable analogy using a common medical example to understand the barriers preventing access to mental health care, would be to allow people with serious heart disease to access health care services only when they were having a MI or other life-threatening problem.

Because of deinstitutionalization and the lack of an adequate mental health infrastructure, many people come into contact with the criminal justice system due to actions resulting from their mental illness and/or chemical dependence. Many people are being criminalized for nonviolent crimes instead of receiving the treatment they need. According to a 2006 Bureau of Justice Statistics report, more than half of all prison and jail inmates, including 56 percent of state prisoners, 45 percent of federal prisoners and 64 percent of local jail inmates, were found to have a mental health problem (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). Prisons are the new mental health facilities where people with mental illnesses are boarded until their sentence is completed, only to be released into the community to begin the cycle again.

As emergency nurses on the frontline of health care, we have an opportunity to impact the lives of our individual patients and families on a daily basis. Because the mental health system is fragmented, we are often at a loss to give our patients the care their families are seeking. This can leave the emergency nurse frustrated and feeling inadequate, but there are a number of actions that can be taken.

**What Can Emergency Nurses Do?**

- Contact your local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Through NAMI, you will find a partner that is regarded as a powerful advocate for mental health services. You also will have many resources to educate yourself.
- Read the 2009 NAMI “Grading the States” report, which offers a comprehensive perspective on the mental health care system in our country.
- Partner with key allies in your community—law enforcement, crisis team members and community mental health resources—to open up lines of communication, to improve the care for members in your community.
- Educate yourself. Chances are, you or a family member has or will be affected by a serious mental illness at some point in life.
- Help stamp out the stigma of mental illness. Advocate for your patients when they cannot speak for themselves.

Often the family of the individual with a mental illness is left feeling hopeless and helpless when the system does not work as desired. This can be especially true when the patient presents voluntarily, only to face multiple hurdles when attempting to get help. To aid family members assist their loved ones, emergency nurses can offer the following list of resources:

**General Mental Health Resources**

- ENA Web site contains numerous mental health associations, agencies, and resources.
relevant to caring for psychiatric patients in
org/practice/practpriority/Psych/Pages/
Default.aspx

- Mental Health America (formerly known
as the National Mental Health Association)
is the country’s leading nonprofit dedicated
to helping all people live mentally healthier
lives. More than 320 affiliates nationwide.
http://www.nmha.org

- Bring Change 2 Mind is a non-profit organi-
ization created by actress Glenn Close, The
Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation,
Fountain House and the International Mental
Health Research Organization. The mission
is to provide people with misconceptions
about mental illness, provide quick and
easy access to information that combats
stigma, and people with mental illness and
those who know them quick and easy access
to information and support. http://www.
bringchange2mind.org

- National Institute for Mental Health is the
largest scientific organization in the world
dedicated to research focused on the un-
derstanding and treatment of mental health

- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)
drug use screening tools, NIDA-Modified
Alcohol, Smoking, and Substance Involvement
nidamed/

- National Alliance on Mental Illness
is a grassroots mental health advocacy
organization dedicated to improving the
lives of those affected by a mental illness.
http://www.nami.org

- HOPES is a nonprofit organization based in
Madison, Wisconsin, composed of suicide
survivors whose losses have motivated them
to action. http://www.hopes-wi.org

- Suicide Prevention Resource Center
provides support, training and resources to
assist organizations and individuals to develop
suicide prevention programs. www.sprc.org

Resources for Veterans

- Veteran’s Health Council
http://www.veteranshealth.org/

- Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
is the nation’s first and largest nonprofit,
nonpartisan advocacy organization for
veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.
http://www.iava.org

- Grantmakers in Health – Filling the Gaps
in Military Mental Health http://www.gih.
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