



COVID-19: Emotional Support for Families of Color

The MHANJ recently received funding from the New Jersey Pandemic Relief Fund (NJPRF) to increase access to mental health support for families of color impacted by COVID-19, focusing in the most impacted counties in New Jersey. The funding will be used for an initiative entitled COVID-19 Pandemic: Emotional Support for Families of Color, a partnership program designed to work with churches and community organizations to improve the mental health of families of color, which ultimately can improve their overall wellness and quality of life.

According to Carolyn Beauchamp, MHANJ's President and CEO, "This program expands the scope of the MHANJ's well-established PEWS (Promoting Emotional Wellness and Spirituality) program, led by Laverne S. Williams. PEWS has worked with New Jersey's churches for over 15 years, providing education and training to Pastors, Deacons and church ministries to address the stigma of mental illness."

Laverne S. Williams, CSW, Director of PEWS, stated, "The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the emotional health of families across our state, but most significantly families of color. Families have faced enormous upheaval as people deal with chronic physical health issues and the emotional and financial challenges brought on by the pandemic. While many religious services continue virtually, the emotional and spiritual support afforded through attending church and congregational activities cannot be replicated for many families. Emotional Support for Families of Color is designed to help on many levels."

The program benefits from MHANJ's diverse and experienced staff representing a wide spectrum of MHANJ's established employees and new additions from across the state. In addition to Ms. Williams, the team includes: Jaime Angelini, Colette Thomas-Lamothe, Daysi Sanz, Daniel Stern, KiMani Divine, La Verne Saunders, Parantap Pandya, Sharon Gbadamosi, Tahira Ayub, Vernon Hall and Victoria Gray.

The project will closely collaborate with spiritual and community-based organizations to help families deal with this crisis. It will provide support groups and education programs that recognize racism and its impact on the behavioral health of people of color, and work with key stakeholders to increase behavioral health awareness, education and engagement in communities of color. An important component of this initiative will be a virtual COVID-19 Emotional Support Center that will offer culturally relevant behavioral health resources, virtual supports and education groups, information and referral, and family support services.

In a press release from NJPRF, First Lady Tammy Murphy, its founding chair, stated, "The coronavirus has had an adverse effect on the mental health of many New Jerseyans, but it has disproportionately impacted communities of color, students, and front-line workers. It's vitally important that we address the mental health needs of our vulnerable populations."