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## Ending the Silence on Mental Illness

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# PURDUE JOURNAL OF SERVICE-LEARNING AND INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

## Ending the Silence on Mental Illness

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### Introduction

I first became interested in mental health advocacy when one of my family members was diagnosed with a mental illness. I have come to realize that volunteering for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) on Campus, and specifically the Ending the Silence program, has helped me cope with the challenges associated with mental illness as a family member. I plan to continue work with the ETS program and NAMI–WCI to educate adolescents in hopes that fewer teenagers suffer from the effects of mental illness. My involvement was driven by my passion for helping others and a desire to change the culture surrounding mental illness.

### Community Partner Description

The National Alliance on Mental Illness on Campus at Purdue University is a branch of the national NAMI organization. Its main priority is to spread awareness and work toward debunking the stigma associated with mental illness in the college community. NAMI on Campus partnered with NAMI–West Central Indiana and the local West Lafayette and Lafayette high schools to address a need for mental health education for the adolescent population. The two NAMI branches created the first Ending the Silence (ETS) volunteer team in the state of Indiana. The goal of the ETS program is to focus on educating adolescent students on basic mental health information, including but not limited to signs and symptoms of a mental health crisis, how to be a supportive friend of someone living with a mental health condition, and what to do if a friend is suicidal (NAMI, 2016). The goal is not to educate the students on specific mental

health conditions, but to provide potentially life-saving information and resources to a vulnerable and high-risk population. The hope is that our efforts will initiate an open and meaningful dialogue about mental health in our youth.

### Activities and Impact

The ETS program consists of a 30-minute educational program, a 15-minute young adult presentation, and a 10-minute Q&A session. The first presentation contains information on the basics of mental health conditions, warning signs of a mental health crisis, and the stigma associated with mental illness, and incorporates a personal reflection on the presenter’s journey as a family member of someone living with a mental health condition (NAMI, 2016). The second presenter shares his or her story of living with a mental health condition, including a reflection on their diagnosis, treatment, and recovery processes; this portion of the program was designed to provide a real-life, relatable connection to the audience. Lastly, the Q&A session is a time for students to ask difficult questions in an open and safe environment. For example, students in our previous presentations have asked the presenters how to handle self-harm, where to find resources relating to specific mental illnesses, and what to do when a parent does not believe their mental health concerns. Ultimately by delivering key information and personal reflections in this program, the presenters remind youth that mental health conditions do not define a person and that they are not alone in their own fight against mental illness.

### Reflection and Conclusion

This program has reached more than 500 students in the state of Indiana and continues to grow each semester. While the team’s goal is to educate all 9th and 10th grade health classes in the Lafayette and West Lafayette

area, more volunteers are needed to meet the high demand. The Tippecanoe School Corporation is eager to work with the ETS team, but sustainability must be addressed. NAMI on Campus is looking for solutions to this issue and is recruiting more ETS volunteers to present this program for the 2017–2018 school year. From the previous ETS presentations at an Indianapolis school, the NAMI Indiana leadership conference, and the Indianapolis Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA) conference, the team has found that this experience has been mutually beneficial for the volunteers and the audience. The volunteers are educating and influencing the next generation on a relevant issue, and the local adolescent population gains new skills and knowledge from the volunteers. Personally, this program has allowed me to explore different avenues of mental health advocacy and push the limits of my comfort zone. From these experiences, I have not only grown as a public speaker, but as a future nurse who is passionate about education and advocacy for my patients. Ultimately, NAMI on Campus and NAMI–WCI will work together to reach our ETS educational goal and pursue the mission of educating, spreading awareness, and advocating for all who are living with or affected by mental illness.

#### **NAMI on Campus at Purdue University Contact Information**

Address: 610 Purdue Mall, West Lafayette, IN 47907;  
Office information: Stewart Center, room B6H at Purdue  
University; Phone number: (765) 423-6939

#### **NAMI–WCI Contact Information**

Address: 1508 Tippecanoe Street, Lafayette, IN 47904;  
Website: <http://www.nami-wci.org>; Phone number:  
(765) 423-6939

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## **Author Bio Sketch**

**Anna L. Tamulonis** is a senior in Purdue University's nursing program and a graduate student in the accelerated master's in public health program. Currently, she serves as treasurer for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) on Campus at Purdue University—a collegiate branch of the national, grassroots organization—and is a lead presenter for NAMI's Ending the Silence (ETS) program. Her goal is to become a registered nurse focused on the adolescent population and community health, and to eventually pursue an advanced degree in nursing.