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TOGETHER AGAINST STIGMA CONFERENCE ENERGIZES GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH MOVEMENT TO ERADICATE STIGMA

San Francisco, California Hosts International Conference for First Time in U.S

(San Francisco, CA) – A groundbreaking conference of more than 750 prominent thought leaders, researchers, advocates, practitioners and policymakers from at least 17 countries gathered in San Francisco last week, energizing a global movement working to advance mental health around the globe. Held February 18-20, the 7th International “Together Against Stigma” Conference marked its first hosting in the United States.

“It is significant that this conference is in California – a leader in challenging stigma and implementing strategies to eliminate it,” said **Wayne Clark, PhD**, incoming Executive Director of the California Mental Health Services Authority, which hosted the conference along with the California Institute for Behavioral Health Solutions, the County Behavioral Health Directors Association of California, and the World Psychiatric Association. “Together, we are growing a shared commitment to make mental health support accessible across the globe.”

Stigma is a primary reason only 30-40 percent of people in the U.S. who are experiencing mental health challenges seek help. The conference underscored the fact that stigma associated with mental health challenges is not exclusive to any one country or culture: it is pervasive, encountered at all levels of society, institutions, among families and within the healthcare profession itself.

The conference shared groundbreaking research and innovative strategies to fuel a growing worldwide movement dedicated to eliminating stigma as a barrier to mental health. Each Mind Matters: California’s Mental Health Movement played a leading role in launching a global conversation that will continue, via social media with the hashtags #Stigma2015 and #eachmindmatters, after conference attendees return to their home countries.

In addition to the groundbreaking scholarly research presented by the international academic community, the three-day program offered a diverse range of speakers.

- With a theme of “New Opportunities and Future Directions,” the first day of the conference featured a panel on the critical role of entertainment, news and social media in fighting stigma. **Rita Fabi of Facebook** highlighted opportunities social media can play in reaching a broad audience and connecting users for support when they experience mental health concerns. Hollywood writers **Roger Wolfson (“Law and Order”)** and **Hayley Schore (“Blackbox”)** shared their strategies for telling compelling and realistic stories addressing mental health in shows broadcast to millions, and a new generation of creative artists and activists used art, performance, and new media to share how they engage young people in new attitudes around mental health.
- “Mental health doesn’t register as partisan, it registers as human,” explained former U.S. Senator **Gordon H. Smith**, president and CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) during a powerful and personal keynote in which he opened up

about the tragic loss of his son to suicide and his efforts in the Senate and at NAB to honor his son's memory and help millions of young people. In 2004, former Senator Smith created the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act (GLSMA) in honor of his son – the first federal legislation to provide funding specifically for youth suicide prevention programs. His advocacy and leadership has continued in his role with the NAB through the Ok2Talk Campaign, an online community where teens and young adults struggling with mental health challenges can share person stories of recovery, struggle or hope.

- The second day of the conference, which focused on empowering the next generation of mental health advocates and professionals, kicked off with an address from **Alison Malmom**, founder and Executive Director of Active Minds, the nation's leading student mental health organization with more than 420 chapters on college and university campuses across the U.S., Puerto Rico and Canada. Malmom turned the tragedy of her brother's suicide into an opportunity to raise awareness, build support and generate advocacy among college students. Malmom shared the frustration young people feel over the "the stigma they have inherited from previous generations" and discussed the value of empowering young adults in stigma reduction activities.
- In a stirring speech to open the final day of the conference, **Paolo del Vecchio**, director of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) declared, "We must focus on what's strong and not what's wrong. We must stand up and tell the truth about mental illness." In his remarks, del Vecchio, a self-identified mental health consumer, trauma survivor, and person in recovery from addictions, discussed the critical need to eliminate prejudice and to seek social inclusion in order to eliminate discrimination here in the U.S. He shared that SAMHSA is partnering with First Lady Michelle Obama on an upcoming initiative around veteran's mental health.
- Continuing the theme of "global perspectives and action," a panel featured groundbreaking and innovative approaches in stigma reduction activities in the developing and post-conflict nations of Fiji and Liberia. A culture of silence in the island nation of Fiji has contributed to suicide being a leading cause of death of young people. Among the culturally-relevant efforts developed to combat stigma, researchers worked to discover positive terms for mental health, mental illness and recovery grounded in Fiji's diverse communities. In 2010, Liberia had one psychiatrist in the entire country and no mental health care system. Through the work of The Carter Center Mental Health Program, Liberia has achieved 100 percent coverage with 144 mental health clinicians.
- The conference concluded with an international panel featuring representatives from leading mental health campaigns worldwide, including Opening Minds (Canada), Time to Change (England), beyondblue (Australia), One of Us (Denmark), SEE me (Scotland), and Like Minds Like Mine (New Zealand). Panelists shared lessons learned and ideas on how California and the U.S. can partner with other countries to have global impact.

During the conference, emerging and determined leaders in stigma change were recognized for their work in research, advocacy and community practice. **Former California State Senate President pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg** was honored with the "Mental Health Champion" award for his lifetime of relentless advocacy in mental health. Steinberg authored California's Prop. 63, which dedicated 20 percent of new mental health revenues to prevention and early intervention strategies, including stigma reduction.

Other honorees included:

Patrick Corrigan, PsyD -- Dignity Champion

Corrigan of the Illinois Institute of Technology has pioneered research on the impact of stigma. He was recognized for "Excellence in challenging stigma/discrimination and promoting the dignity/strengths of people with mental health conditions through broad-level achievements."

Otto Wahl, PhD -- Thought Leader

Wahl, a professor at University of Hartford was honored for "Achievement in contributions to the science, research, and practice of knowledge in stigma and discrimination."

Opening Minds -- Innovator

The Canadian effort to reduce stigma was awarded for a "Program which creates major impact through new approaches that inspire new possibilities and/or disrupt prevailing views."

Tara Pir, PhD -- Community Champion

Pir is a founding leader of the Institute for Multicultural Counseling and Education Services, affiliated with the United Nation for Human Rights. Her conference recognition focused on "Achievement in supporting/promoting underserved, unserved, oppressed or marginalized peoples."

Brian Dyak -- Change Agent

Dyak of the Entertainment Industries Council has transformed depiction of health and social issues. He was honored for contributions as an "Individual who provides leadership/innovation in the field by connecting disciplines, driving innovation, and advocacy."

Conference materials are available online <http://www.togetheragainststigma.org>.

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