May is Mental Health Month

Facts about Mental Illness and Violence

The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent

- Mental illness alone does not lead to violence (Elbogen and Johnson, 2009).
- The majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).
- A person’s mental health status contributes very little to the overall level of violence in society (Monahan, John, 1992).

Other factors contribute to violence

For people with mental illnesses, violent behavior appears to be more common when there are other factors. These include substance abuse or dependence, a history of violence, juvenile detention, physical abuse, being a crime victim, getting divorced, or losing a job (Elbogen and Johnson, 2009).

People with mental illness are more likely to be victims of crime

- The relationship between mental illness and violence is greatly exaggerated in the minds of the general public (Institute of Medicine, 2006).
- People with psychiatric disabilities are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violent crime (Appleby, et al., 2001). People with severe mental illnesses are 2 ½ times more likely to be attacked, raped or mugged than the general population (Hiday, et al., 1999).

The link between mental illnesses and violence is exaggerated by the media

- At least one-third of news stories about mental illness focus on violence (Wahl, et al. 2002).
- Most news accounts portray people with mental illness as dangerous (Wahl, 1995).
- Characters in prime time TV portrayed as having a mental illness are depicted as the most dangerous of all demographic groups: 60% were shown to be involved in crime or violence (Mental Health America, 1999).

What can I do to reduce stigma and bias?

- Help educate others that most people who suffer from a mental disorder are not violent — there is no need to fear them.
- Embrace people with mental health conditions for who they are — normal human beings experiencing a difficult time, who need your open mind, caring attitude, and helpful support.
- Learn more about fighting stigma at www.nami.org.

Resource: Mental Health Reporting (University of Washington)

For more information, contact: The Office of Consumer Partnerships - dbhrconsumerpartnerships@dshs.wa.gov, or the Washington Recovery Help Line at 1-866-789-1511.

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services – Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery