

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

*A periodic feature that recognizes individuals whose efforts—
often unsung—enhance the health of North Carolinians*

Cherene Allen-Caraco, QMHP, QDDP



When Cherene Allen-Caraco moved to Charlotte, North Carolina and observed gaps in the state's mental health system, she quickly became involved in efforts to

identify solutions in the Mecklenburg County community. In her role as director of Mecklenburg's PROMISE, Allen-Caraco promotes the concept of mental health recovery. Where traditional approaches emphasize stabilization and maintenance, this recovery model for mental health treatment differs in that its primary emphasis is on hope and the ability of an individual to thrive and lead a productive, meaningful, and valued life despite his/her mental health condition.

Allen-Caraco's combination of professional and lived mental health experience gives her valuable perspective. Kim Franklin, PhD, a colleague at Meridian Behavioral Health Services, speaks highly of Allen-Caraco's passion and commitment as well as her strength as a credible and articulate consumer advocate. She says, "Cherene is one of the strongest recovery champions in North Carolina. ... She knows how to wrestle with the complex issues the state is facing."

About 6 years ago, Allen-Caraco helped to found Mecklenburg's PROMISE, a peer-run mental health community resource. Staffed by individuals in recovery themselves, Mecklenburg's PROMISE not only serves as a leader and resource for recovery in the community, but it is also a striking example of what recovery and wellness can look like for individuals with mental health conditions. Mecklenburg's PROMISE offers recovery education and training to behavioral health professionals and paraprofessionals, individuals in recovery, and the community in addition to peer support programs. Mecklenburg's PROMISE promotes collaboration between behavioral health professionals, indi-

viduals in recovery, and their family members and serves as a resource for any member of the community. In 2007, it was named the North Carolina Program of Excellence for Consumer-Directed Support.

In addition to her work at Mecklenburg's PROMISE, Allen-Caraco serves as a mental health consultant with The Council on Quality and Leadership (CQL), which offers consultation, accreditation, and training services to organizations across the nation. She consults with groups such as provider organizations, state and local governing authorities, advocacy and peer organizations, and hospital systems. She helps the committed organizations integrate principles of recovery into their services and cultivate recovery culture through both practice and organizational change.

Colleagues speak highly of Allen-Caraco's efforts and her contribution to mental health initiatives throughout North Carolina. Franklin says, "Cherene has been instrumental in keeping North Carolina accountable and focused on recovery." Another colleague, Debbie Dihoff, MA, from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) North Carolina says, "Cherene does a wonderful job orienting everything to achieve the best possible health for people. She always finds time to do the extra work that makes a big difference in the lives of people with mental illness in the state."

Allen-Caraco earned her bachelor degree at the University of Syracuse, and is currently studying psychiatric rehabilitation at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. NCMJ

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