

## PEERS: Their Mission and Services

*Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas*

Peers Envisioning and Engaging in Recovery Services (PEERS) is a diverse local community organization for people with mental health experiences. Their mission is to promote innovative, peer-based wellness strategies. They create culturally rich, community-based mental health programs that honor diverse experiences and eliminate stigma and discrimination in Alameda County. The group's tag line is "Love more, Judge less." They are funded by Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services through the Mental Health Services Act (Prop 63).

At a special August speaker meeting, NAMI East Bay heard from Program Manager **Kimberly Marquez-Cortes**, Outreach Specialist **Reza Hasani**, and Evaluation and Policy Specialist **Sarah Marxer** about the group's programs and services. They each have lived experience either as a person with mental illness or the family member of someone with mental illness, and sometimes both.

PEERS both supports individuals and works to make changes in communities so that people can freely choose among their mental health treatment options and be valued for their contributions to society. The organization values hope, collaboration, a basis in strengths, cultural responsiveness, lived experience, peer support, social inclusion, self-determination, empowerment, and personal responsibility. They have a variety of programs to support these goals and values.

**Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP®)** helps someone develop a personal plan for getting well and staying well. This evidence-based program is open to anyone, with an orientation session by Zoom on the fourth Thursday of each month. This is followed by weekly support groups. There are also training sessions twice a year for those who want to lead the support groups and mentoring sessions for the facilitators.

**Everyone Counts Campaign (ECC)** addresses discrimination and social exclusion by engaging with key stakeholder groups. The program invites individuals to form "action teams" to uncover, highlight, and decrease the effects of discrimination. PEERS has held these two-year campaigns in the Asian American and Pacific Islander, African American, and Latinx communities.

**Lift Every Voice and Speak (LEVS)** is a speakers' bureau that meets on the first and third Wednesdays and prepares speakers to engage with groups around Alameda County.

**Teens and Young Adults (TYA)** addresses the needs of people aged 16 to 24 in Alameda County. "Youth Collaboration" trains them to become community leaders through hands-on, youth-led projects in social justice and youth empowerment. "Circle Up" is a casual, social space for young people to meet new peers and engage in wellness activities.

**Healing Arts** uses art therapy as a tool in the wellness journey.

**Hope and Faith** is a program that forms partnerships with African American faith-based institutions to provide mental health education.

**Special Messages** is a support group for people who hear voices and receive messages that others don't. It will launch in October with Zoom meetings on the first Friday of each month and then transition to in-person meetings.

**Buried in Treasures (BiT)** will be a support and skills-building group for people who want to manage moderate to severe levels of clutter in their lives. It will begin in February 2024 and will be held once a year.

**Programs to Encourage Active, Rewarding Lives (PEARLS)** is for adults aged 65 and older to educate them about depression and to develop skills for self-sufficiency in an active life. Starting in October, it will offer six to eight sessions over four to five months, with follow-up calls for several months thereafter.

“Developing research,” Sarah Marxer said, “is showing that peer support may decrease hospitalizations, use of inpatient services, internalized stigma, and costs to the mental health system.” The PEERS programs are designed to increase social connectivity, empowerment and hope, community engagement, engagement in treatment services, and life satisfaction.

You can learn more at <https://www.peersnet.org/>. Their Twitter/X and Instagram addresses are @peersorg; their Facebook account is @peerscommunity, and their YouTube presence is PeersTV.