

# What the Community Thinks about behavioral health issues

A randomized, statistically reliable telephone survey of adults in Northern Lakes CMH's six counties was conducted in December 2010 by Northwestern Michigan College Research Services to measure community awareness and attitudes about mental health and disability issues. The survey indicates we continue to have a very supportive community. Compared to two years ago, opinion strength overall seems to be slightly weaker, with movement from the strongly agree/disagree categories to the somewhat agree/disagree categories. This may be good, in that unsolicited verbatim comments suggest that people are less willing to generalize about people with disabilities; i.e., their answers would depend on illness severity and if the person was receiving treatment. The exception is the rating of the quality of service at Northern Lakes CMH, which shifted from above average to excellent (36.7%/15% above average/excellent in 2008 to 29%/24.2% above average/excellent in 2010).

Some of the responses are exactly what one would expect and give credence to the results overall. For example, people who personally know someone who has received treatment for a mental illness or developmental disability are more likely to be aware of Northern Lakes and know who to call if they knew a child experiencing a mental health crisis. Conversely, people who do not personally know someone with a mental illness or developmental disability tend to be not at all aware of Northern Lakes and do not know who to call for a child in crisis. Also not surprisingly, knowing who to call for help is directly related to a person's length of residency; i.e., those living in our area for longer periods have greater knowledge of who to call than those who have lived here only a short time.

Most people agreed that treatment can help persons with mental illness lead normal lives, but fewer agreed that people are generally caring and sympathetic to persons with mental illness. Positively, when compared to state and national data from *Attitudes Toward Mental Illness—35 States, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, 2007*, published in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, May 28, 2010, people in Northern Lakes CMH counties have stronger belief in the efficacy of treatment than in 36 of the 37 jurisdictions reported! Local attitudes about stigma (the caring and sympathetic statement), however, were slightly less positive than in other areas of the state and nation. Some of the adverse attitudes might be caused by stigma experienced by some respondents (e.g., those with mental health problems who received less support at work or experienced exclusion from activities). Respondents who perceived adverse attitudes about empathy also might have had less contact with persons with mental illness, or also might harbor misconceptions about the risks associated with mental health symptoms. Interestingly, in the Northern Lakes CMH service area, men and women are far apart in their perceptions of empathy; men tended to strongly or somewhat agree that people are sympathetic, and women strongly or somewhat disagreed. One may speculate that women may be more in touch with the reality of the situation or cognizant of the amount of anti-stigma work to be done; certainly, the possibilities could be the topic of spirited debate among local stakeholders.

