

**NAMI SPONSORS CONFERENCE ON DECRIMINALIZATION OF MENTAL
ILLNESS: IT TAKES A VILLAGE**
By Kathleen Piché, L.C.S.W., Public Affairs Director



On Friday, September 27, 2013, NAMI Westside, in collaboration with other local NAMI affiliates and stakeholders, sponsored *It Takes a Village: Decriminalizing Mental Illness*, a conference to discuss the growing concerns around the large number of mentally ill that are incarcerated.

The morning discussion featured LA County Sheriff Lee Baca, LA County District Attorney Jackie Lacy, former California State Department of Mental Health Director Stephen Mayberg, Ph.D., and LACDMH Director Marvin Southard, D.S.W. Ms. Lacy spoke about the Co-occurring Disorder Court and of doing a project with LACDMH, possibly around a pre-booked diversion program. “The stars are perfectly aligned,” she said, “with prison over-crowding, this is an opportunity to do something for those with mental illness.”

Chief David Fender, a 39 year veteran for the Sheriff’s department, spoke on Sheriff Baca’s behalf and mentioned that California Senate President pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg recently visited the LA County Jail, along with the LA County Board of Supervisors, to discuss decriminalizing mental illness. Chief Fender said that those in jail with mental illnesses have a 57 percent chance of returning.

Dr. Mayberg identified problems concerning the criminalization of mental illness: insufficient funding of mental health resources, no long term care within the state and the fact that many feel safer when someone with mental illness is locked up. “Moving

those with mental illness into state hospitals does not solve the problem,” Dr. Mayberg said.

Dr. Southard acknowledged the benefits of multiple agencies working together and reviewed several opportunities for improvement:

- 1) Legislation approval for real drug and alcohol treatment within Medi-Caid,
- 2) Working with the Sheriff, the District Attorney and other law enforcement to find alternate ways to handle those with a mental illness that commit petty crimes, and
- 3) Support SB 82, and provide more access to crisis residential and crisis stabilization programs.

“We may be able to create a forensic urgent care where law enforcement can bring persons,” he said. Dr. Southard also mentioned that the best outcomes come from a community that takes care of each other.

The free conference drew a packed crowd of over 100 and offered afternoon workshops in the Mental Health Court Linkages Programs, information on LPS conservatorships, the AB109 program, school intervention programs, Court 95 and Laura’s Law. CEU’s were offered for a law and ethics review course for \$50.

