Mothers with special needs children are at risk for depression and related disorders (Reuters, 4/18/2008). Studies show parents of special needs children have significantly higher divorce rates than those with typically developing children. Medical illness, financial stressors, faith based issues, and employment struggles often accompany the challenges of being a primary caregiver of a special needs child.

When you become a mother it is often a miraculous experience in your life. When your child is identified as having special needs, it is potentially the most devastating experience of your life.

As the primary caregiver mothers try to “fix” everything for their child. Some challenges cannot be fixed, but rather adapted to. The “MOM 2 MOM” Peer Support Helpline Program answers the need.

An abundance of resources for children with special needs have been established with a focus on advocacy, education, and financial support for those loved ones. The missing link however has been the recognition for the needed services for the primary caregiver’s mental health and wellness, specifically a service for mothers.

By dialing 1-877-914- MOM2 (1-877-914-6662) MOM 2 MOM helpline program a mother of a child with special needs will receive the following services;

**Mom 2 Mom Peer Support** - M2M Peer Supporters will be available to provide telephone peer support to callers in need. Moms of special needs children trained in peer counseling and crisis support will offer peer support, explain resources, and explore your needs. Mom 2 Mom peer support is also available through our website for a live chat experience online.

**Mom 2 Mom Clinical Assessment** - M2M Clinicians will be on the helpline as part of the team of clinical professionals available to do telephonic assessment and gage the depression, anxiety, and family & marital issues, etc. that may be impacting your life.

**Mom 2 Mom Network** - A M2M database of specially trained service providers will be available for referrals for your mental health needs.

**MOM 2 MOM Support Groups** - Within your communities Mom Peer Supporters will be available every month for Mom 2 Mom support groups.
Imagine the daily worry.

How will my child’s life unfold? How will this diagnosis of special needs impact relationships with family members, peers, and friends; finances; overall health and well-being?

Mothers of children with special needs can feel devastated, shocked, consumed by the caregiver focus and the guilt. But research shows there are few, if any, supports for mothers’ mental health. Resources largely focus on helping them to take care of their children, not themselves.

Meanwhile, research has shown that depression and divorce rates for these mothers exceed those of women who do not have special needs children.

It is critical to decrease the mental health burden on moms of special needs children. To that end, University Behavioral HealthCare (UBHC), a division of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ), has established the Mom 2 Mom helpline: 877–914–MOM2 [877–914–6662].

Like UBHC’s Cop2Cop and Vet2Vet, existing peer–to–peer helplines, Mom2Mom will provide peer support, conduct clinical assessment, and share resources with mothers of children with a range of special needs.

“We see hope in the reflection of ourselves in each other. That’s the idea that Mom2Mom is based on,” says Cherie Castellano, M.A., L.P.C., director of Mom2Mom, Vet2Vet and Cop2Cop. “Moms typically bond at the grocery store or at the doctor’s office or on the playground. Mom2Mom supports mothers with special needs children,
giving them a specific outlet where they can cope with their stress, maintain their mental health.”

The helpline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Persons who dial the helpline will speak with other moms of special needs children who have undergone training to provide support services.

Mom2Mom [(877)–914–MOM2] is being offered initially in Essex and Union counties through a Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey grant awarded through the Foundation of UMDNJ.

Since its launch in November, Mom2Mom has made more than 500 contacts. That figure includes calls fielded and outreach to clients and prospective clients over the phone and at face-to-face meetings, as well as in- and out-of-state inquiries about the helpline's services.

Approximately half of the 60+ active Mom2Mom cases involve mothers with autistic children. The other cases involve moms whose children's disabilities range from developmental delays to Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) to Down Syndrome to medical illnesses such as premature ventricular complexes (PVC, a heart arrhythmia) and hypotonia (muscle weakness).

Their circumstances vary, but, within just three months, a clearer picture of the common issues these moms face has emerged. The top reported concerns are around family/parenting; depression and mood disorder; anxiety/phobias; “other,” such as finances or unemployment; marital/couples issues; medical/somatic complaints; school stressors; aggression/violence; legal; and physical abuse.
“As the primary caregivers, mothers try to ‘fix’ everything for their child. Some challenges can’t be ‘fixed’ but, rather, must be adapted to. Mom2Mom will walk alongside these moms through their journeys,” Castellano said.

Meet the Staff

Cherie Castellano, M.A., C.S.W., L.P.C.

Cherie Castellano is the Program Director for the Mom 2 Mom helpline program at University Behavioral HealthCare – University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey. Funded by the HealthCare Foundation of New Jersey through a grant award to the UMDNJ Foundation, Cherie utilized her experience with “high risk populations”
to create the Mom 2 Mom program. Cherie’s advocacy as a mother prompted her to create a faith-based group entitled “And A Child Shall Lead Us” to provide support for mothers with special needs children. Her fundraising yielded $100,000 for families struggling with disabled children and in 2010 she received a grant for a “Mom 2 Mom Helpline” for mothers with special needs children prompted by this experience.

As the Program Director for Cop 2 Cop, the first legislated law enforcement crisis hotline in the United States, is nationally recognized for her work in peer support. Through Cop 2 Cop, over 28,000 calls 187 suicides have been averted. Cherie is also the Director of the NJVet2Vet Helpline serving the NJ military partnering peers & clinicians for success. Cherie is the Director of a new program for soldiers in Fort Hood, Texas entitled “Vets4Warriors” and has expanded her veterans service to active duty military in this new endeavor.

Following September 11, Cherie led response to 1,900 first responders in NY & NJ. She began civilian 9/11 services to NJ residents impacted with “For You New Jersey 9/11 Helpline”. Recognized internationally she lectured in Australia, Ireland, Belfast, England and across the U.S. After the Hurricane Katrina Disaster she received FEMA funding for Police in New Orleans.

Awards include Governors Excellence Award in Volunteerism, N.J. Attorney General Recognition Award, ICISF World Congress Award, Commerce Bank New Jersey Hometown Hero, Unico Woman of the Year, NJ Interfaith Coalition for the Disabled Lay
Person Award, “People Who Made A Difference in 2005” – Star Ledger, Italian American Police Society of New Jersey “Woman of the Year”, New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs Civilian Commendation Medal, and the Governor’s Council on Mental Health Stigma Ambassador Award.

Cherie co-authored “Psychological Counterterrorism and World War IV” and “Law Enforcement Families; The Ultimate Back-Up” and several book chapters and articles.

Cherie served on Governor Codey’s Mental Health Task Force and Governor Corzine’s Task Force on Police Suicide.

Cherie is married to Mark, a Detective Supervisor with the Morris County Prosecutors’ Office, has two (2) young sons Louis John and Domenick, and believes her role as a police wife is her greatest achievement.

Her experience in peer support has confirmed her concept of “reciprocal peer support” in that properly trained peers with clinical partners can offer peer services and have an opportunity to experience their own resilience and share it with others. In this approach, peer support is healing for both the peer supporter and the peer in need.

**Dawn Dreyer Valovcin**

Dawn Dreyer Valovcin is a family caregiver for a sister with cerebral palsy.

Valovcin has a Master's Degree in human service administration. She previously ran group homes for adults with traumatic brain injury and dually-diagnosed developmentally disabled adults for many years.

She currently teaches psychology at Middlesex County College and works with a handicapped preschool in the Metuchen Public School district.

Valovcin is Mom2Mom’s first peer counselor. She joined the helpline in November 2010. She enjoys working on the Mom2Mom helpline both as a peer and a resource for parents.
“I know the challenges we face as family members fighting for resources for your loved one and feeling, some days, like you’re at the end of your rope,” she says. “When you are stressed by the challenges in your life, Mom2Mom will help you, reinforcing that you are capable and will get through it.”

**Kathy Hunt**

Kathy Hunt is a mom who is all too familiar with the many ongoing concerns and challenges of raising a special needs child. Her youngest child was diagnosed with autism at the age of two.

Hunt, who holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in psychology and business, spent nearly 15 years as a human resources professional and brings organizational and client-focused skills, combined with real life experience as the mother of a special needs child, to Mom2Mom.

When her child was first diagnosed, Hunt found caring moms through parent support groups who could relate to the enormous stresses she was facing. To this day, she still maintains friendships with many of these moms and has found their support invaluable and hopeful.

“The Mom2Mom program is a great resource for Moms of special needs children to connect with other moms who can relate to their circumstances and empathize with them,” she says.

**Annette Evans**

Annette Evans is the mother of a 44-year-old son who is learning disabled and has epilepsy.

As an advocate, Evans was instrumental in creating inclusive afterschool programs, counseled parents regarding IEP’s, and battled against discrimination.
Evans was a participating member of Parents of Exceptional Children, Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, and ARC.

Evans currently sits on the Board of Trustees of JESPY House Inc., a residential program for learning disabled adults.

About Mom2Mom, Evans says “It is so important for moms to have someone to talk to who truly understands the challenges, traumas and joys of raising a child of special needs. Even with loving families and friends, there is often minimal understanding because others haven’t ‘walked the walk.’ Mom2Mom provides the understanding, compassion and support that are so desperately needed.”

Nakeishia Knox

Nakeishia Knox is the mother of a 14-year-old son with autism.

Knox holds a Master of Public Administration, which was granted by the Rutgers (Newark) School of Public Affairs and Administration.

She currently serves as an advocate for autistic youth in urban areas. With Mom2Mom, Knox will focus mainly on her hometown, Newark, reaching out to the city’s moms with special needs to determine their needs and provide support.

“In urban areas, including Newark, we’re finding it is hard to get the services we need and to educate the parents about developmental disabilities. There are families here who need a lot of help.

“When my son, at the age of two, was diagnosed, I, truthfully, had never even heard of autism. The developmental pediatrician told me my son – my first child – has
a lifelong disability and I had no idea what that meant,” she recalls. “When you first get
the diagnosis, it’s overwhelming. I didn’t have family members or anyone I knew
personally who had gone through this. So I had to deal with it and teach myself a lot.

“I have gone through denial, hoping early interventions would ‘cure’ his autism,
and I’ve wondered from time to time ‘What went wrong?’

“So I can relate to people who connect with Mom2Mom,” Knox adds. “Talking to
somebody who is living this journey, although it may be a different walk, is therapeutic
for the families that contact the program and for me. Together, we can get through
anything. We can support each other.”

Safiyyah A. Muhammad

Safiyyah A. Muhammad is the mother of five children, ages 7, 11, 12, 14 and 24.
Two of her children have developmental disabilities. Her 12-year-old is autistic and her
seven-year-old recently was diagnosed with ADHD and intellectual disabilities.

She currently works as a paraprofessional in a special education classroom and
serves as a Consumer Advisory Council member of the Elizabeth Boggs Center for
Developmental Disabilities.

Her family recently participated in “Decoding Autism,” an hourlong documentary
that aired on New Jersey Network (NJN).

She is an advocate for families affected by disabilities, special education and
public education.
“Peer support is something we already do, informally, as mothers, friends, sisters and family members, so to have a more structured method and a means to give this type of support is wonderful,” Muhammad said of Mom2Mom.

“One of the biggest stigmas of mothers with children with disabilities is that we often think we're alone. We believe we are the only ones going through these situations, and fear – of rejection, of a lack of understanding or empathy – prevents us from reaching out,” she added. “Mom2Mom allows people to, confidentially, call somebody who has been there, who is there, and just talk and be heard.”

**Mary Beth Walsh**

Mary Beth Walsh is the mother of two boys: a 12-year-old who has autism and a 16-year-old who does not.

Walsh currently serves as the consumer representative on the board of the New Jersey Association for Behavior Analysis (NJABA) and has served on the Board of Directors of the Association for Science in Autism Treatment (ASAT).

She has been part of the leadership team of the Special Education Parent Teacher Organization in her community for the past six years.

With a doctorate in theology and ethics, she teaches graduate courses in pastoral ministry and advocates for the inclusion of individuals with autism in communities of faith.
She is co-editor of the resource, Journey into Community: Including Individuals with Autism in Faith Communities, and currently serves as co-chair of the Autism Task Force of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability.

Walsh knows how invaluable it is to be able to talk to other moms who are compassionate and can help you figure your situation out.

“Over the years, there have been days I didn’t think I could go on except for the help and support I got from other moms who walked this same journey before me,” she says.

“I can remember going to a support group when my son was very young, close to diagnosis, and being very upset about something. The presence of moms with special needs kids who were about 10, 12 in the room and listening to their stories about their kids meant all the world to me. I thought ‘There will be a time again when we’ll laugh and this will be okay. We will learn to cope.’ Those moms were to me, and the Mom2Mom peer counselors are for other moms, a testimony to hope.”
Healthcare Foundation Provides Start-Up Funding for Mom2Mom

With a gift of more than $91,000 from the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey to start the program, a 24-hour helpline to assist mothers of special needs children with their everyday stresses was rolled out by University Behavioral HealthCare (UBHC), a division of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ).

The Mom2Mom helpline, (877)-914-MOM2, is being offered initially in Essex and Union counties but will help all who call for assistance. It is staffed 24 hours per day, seven days a week, by moms of special needs children who have been trained to provide support services.

“We at the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey are keenly aware of the stress experienced by parents of children with special needs and the difficult job that moms – especially moms – have juggling the care of that child with the needs of a spouse and other children in the family,” says Marsha I. Atkind, executive director, the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey. “We are proud to partner with the Foundation of UMDNJ to establish Mom2Mom, so that mothers know that they are not alone and that there is a place to which they can turn for real understanding and help.”

Mom2Mom’s unique focus will be the needs of mothers. Research shows there are few, if any, supports for mothers’ mental health. Resources largely focus on helping moms to care for their children, not themselves. Meanwhile, depression and divorce rates for these women are estimated to exceed those of women who do not have children with special needs.

“Mothers of children with special needs can feel devastated, shocked, consumed by the caregiver focus and the guilt,” says Cherie Castellano, M.A., L.P.C., director of Mom2Mom. “Up until now, most resources that exist for mothers of special needs children have focused on the child, but mothers need to stay well in order to best care for their families. This program provides support for these mothers to cope with their stress to maintain their mental health.”

Outlook - Spring 2011
UMDNJ Launches Mom2Mom Helpline

Focuses on Moms of Special Needs Children; Partners with Autism New Jersey

NEWARK, N.J. – A 24-hour helpline to assist mothers of special needs children with their everyday stresses is being rolled out by University Behavioral HealthCare (UBHC), a division of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ).

Mom2Mom [(877)-914-MOM2] is being offered initially in Essex and Union counties through a Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey grant awarded through the Foundation of UMDNJ.

To further enhance the support network for mothers of children with special needs, Mom2Mom has partnered with Autism New Jersey, the state’s leading source of information, support, advocacy and public policy for parents of individuals with autism and the professionals who support them.

Mom2Mom’s unique focus will be the needs of mothers. Research shows there are few, if any, supports for mothers’ mental health. Resources largely focus on helping them to take care of their children, not themselves. Meanwhile, depression and divorce rates for these women are estimated to exceed those of women who do not have children with special needs.

“Mothers of children with special needs can feel devastated, shocked, consumed by the caregiver focus and the guilt,” says Cherie Castellano, M.A., L.P.C., director of Mom2Mom. “Up until now, most resources that exist for mothers of children with special needs have focused on the child, but mothers need to stay well in order to best care for their families. This program provides support for these mothers to cope with their stress, maintain their mental health.”
Mom2Mom is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It provides peer support, conducts clinical assessment and shares resources with mothers of children with a range of developmental disabilities. Persons who dial the helpline will speak with other moms of special needs children who have undergone training to provide support services.

“We at the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey are keenly aware of the stress experienced by parents of children with special needs, and the difficult job that moms – especially moms – have juggling the care of that child with the needs of their spouse and other children in the family,” says Marsha I. Atkind, executive director, the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey. The Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey provided $91,688 to launch Mom2Mom. “We are proud to partner with the Foundation of UMDNJ to establish Mom2Mom, so that mothers know that they are not alone and that there is a place to which they can turn for real understanding and help,” Atkind added.

Mom2Mom’s partnership with Autism New Jersey will expand the range of assistance that can be provided to callers. Autism New Jersey maintains a database of referral lists for various healthcare providers, behavior analysts, schools, recreational activities, residential providers, respite services, support groups and more. Its specially trained professionals can give information on topics such as what to do when a child is diagnosed, effective treatment, early intervention, special education, adult services, financial resources and health care insurance.

To date, Autism New Jersey has been unable to staff its helpline (800.4.AUTISM) 24-hours, seven days a week. During business hours, Autism New Jersey’s information helpline is supervised by a licensed clinical psychologist who is also a board certified behavior analyst, and its staff includes three additional board certified behavior analysts. Phones are answered by two trained professionals who also are the parents of children with autism. More than 1,400 parents and professionals have contacted Autism New Jersey for information and referrals in the last six months alone.

However after business hours, callers could only leave a message. With the Autism New Jersey--Mom2Mom partnership, persons calling Autism New Jersey will now be transferred to the Mom2Mom helpline and reach one of its trained volunteers. This will greatly increase and enhance Autism New Jersey’s capacity to serve individuals, families and professionals impacted by autism, says Autism New Jersey Executive Director Linda Meyer, Ed.D., M.P.A., C.P.T.

“Autism New Jersey and UMDNJ-UBHC share identical missions, the same level of commitment to our constituents and the same high standards for staff/volunteer training,” Meyer added. “We both insist on accountability – proving what we do actually does make a difference, and have proven track records serving our respective constituents. Therefore it is a logical next step that we partner on a helpline project to increase access to information, when needed, as needed for families with members with autism.”
The need for the dissemination of accurate and reliable information delivered by skilled and compassionate people was evident in Autism New Jersey’s state-wide listening tour, Meyer said. The data from 537 interviews with self advocates, parents and professionals are summarized in a document: Blueprint of Lifetime Supports: Connecting with Autism. It outlines goals and activities that will lead to an increased quality of life for all New Jersey citizens with autism.

Reporters interested in learning more about Mom2Mom should contact Zenaida Mendez at (973) 972-7273 or mendezze@umdnj.edu.

Reporters interested in learning more about Autism New Jersey may contact Jessica Alloway at (609) 588-8200, ext. 25, or email her at JAlloway@autismnj.org.

The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) is the nation's largest free-standing public health sciences university with more than 6,000 students attending the state’s three medical schools, its only dental school, a graduate school of biomedical sciences, a school of health related professions, a school of nursing and its only school of public health on five campuses. Annually, there are more than two million patient visits at UMDNJ facilities and faculty practices at campuses in Newark, New Brunswick/Piscataway, Scotch Plains, Camden and Stratford. UMDNJ operates University Hospital, a Level I Trauma Center in Newark, and University Behavioral HealthCare, which provides a continuum of healthcare services with multiple locations throughout the state.

###
A new pilot program in New Jersey is attempting to make life a little easier for parents of children with special needs by providing a 24-hour help line offering support, information and resources. The help line, known as Mom2Mom, is staffed day and night by a group of mothers of children with disabilities and mental health professionals. Parents and other caregivers of those with developmental disabilities are encouraged to call for assistance in finding resources in their area or if they simply need an ear to listen. Organizers say the help line is a needed support system for parents of children with special needs who face unique challenges and stress. Modeled after similar help lines for police officers and veterans, Mom2Mom is primarily targeting two New Jersey counties, but will accept calls from throughout the state, reports The (Bergen, N.J.) Record.
UBHC Provides Critical Services Across Multiple Channels

Among its many services, University Behavioral HealthCare manages four confidential, 24-hour peer helplines. Cop2Cop is the oldest, having started 10 years ago, and its success led to the creation of NJ Vet2Vet nearly six years ago. Those two services have helped thousands of law enforcement professionals, military servicemen and women and their families.

In recent weeks, the veterans helpline was expanded to reach the soldiers and their families at Fort Hood, Texas, and a new helpline – Mom 2 Mom – was launched in New Jersey to help mothers of children with special needs cope with their everyday stress. For more details, please visit the Spotlight on Higher Education website.

Article from: This week at UMDNJ, February/March 2011
Cherie Castellano (center), director of the Mom2Mom program, with peer counselors, Autism New Jersey staff and supporters, and others who are interested in the program.

University Behavioral HealthCare (UBHC) has launched The Mom2Mom helpline (877-914-MOM2), in partnership with leading advocacy organization Autism New Jersey. The 24-hour helpline assists mothers of special needs children with everyday stresses. Research shows there are few, if any, supports for mothers’ mental health. Resources largely focus on helping them to take care of their children, not themselves. Meanwhile, depression and divorce rates for these women are estimated to exceed those of women who do not have children with special needs.
The Center for Autism at The North Ward Center is hosting a series of free workshops to mark Autism Awareness Month during April.

The workshops are designed for teachers, parents and caregivers and will feature leading experts in their fields.

"In the year since it was launched, the Center for Autism has become a valuable resource in Newark for families with autism," said Michele Adubato, the executive director of The North Ward Center and the founder of the Center for Autism. "Autism Awareness Month is an opportune time to expand our outreach so more families in the urban environment can benefit from the critical information we are able to provide."

The first workshop, scheduled from 5 to 6 p.m. on Wednesday, April 6 at the Center for Autism at 341 Roseville Avenue, is a MOM2MOM focus group facilitated by Cheree Castellano, the director of MOM2MOM.

Castellano and MOM2MOM peer counselor Nakeishia Knox, a Newark native whose 14-year-old son is autistic, will run the focus group. Participating moms will complete needs assessments, which include questions about their role as caregiver for a child with special needs and its impact on their mental health.

"Participating in this focus group may help normalize a mom’s experience and allow for discussion about ways to cope and resilience," Castellano said.

Castellano said MOM2MOM already has received numerous calls from Newark.

"Partnering with the North Ward Center is one way to gauge the needs of moms in that community, connect with them directly, and share MOM2MOM’s and the North Ward Center’s resources," Castellano said.
MOM2MOM operates a 24-hour helpline, (877) 914-MOM2, to assist mothers of special needs children in Union and Essex counties with their everyday stresses. MOM2MOM is run by University Behavioral HealthCare, a division of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ).

On Tuesday, April 12 from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m., the Center has scheduled Handwriting Without Tears presented by Nereida Meloi, an occupational therapist and Anne Pereira, a special education teacher. The workshop will be held at The North Ward Center, 346 Mount Prospect Avenue. Handwriting Without Tears is a hands-on, educationally sound instructional method to teach handwriting and is easily adaptable to children with special needs.

On Wednesday, April 14 at 4:30, Dr. Isabel DeTrizio Carotenuto, a neurodevelopmental pediatrician, is scheduled to give a one-hour talk on dietary interventions for children with autism at the Center for Autism at 341 Roseville Avenue.

Carotenuto, who has more than 20 years experience in the autism field, specializes in early diagnosis, evaluation and long-range treatment of children within the autism spectrum disorder. She was the director of child development at the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. She also was the medical director of the Child Evaluation Center at John F. Kennedy Medical Center in Edison.

The final workshop is scheduled for April 28 from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. to be held at the Center for Autism at 341 Roseville Avenue. It will feature Christian Meneses, a speech language specialist, who will be discussing functional communication in the environment.

"We are confident that members of the community will find these workshops invaluable," Adubato said. "We urge families with autism to try to come to at least one of the sessions."

© 2011 NJ.com. All rights reserved.
Mom2Mom holds Unity Event to celebrate Mother's Day

Mom2Mom helpline caller, Debra Lee, left, and helpline supporter, Mary Beth Walsh, share their stories with the support group during the Mom2Mom Unity Event on Wednesday, May 4, 2011 to celebrate Mother's Day. Callers and peer supporters meet for the first time. Mom2Mom is a 24 hour, 7 day a week helpline coordinated by UMDNJ-University Behavioral HealthCare that features peer support, telephone assessments, a network of referral services and support groups for mothers of special needs children.

By Patti Sapone/The Star-Ledger
Autism Awareness Month Kicks off at The Center for Autism with MOM2MOM Focus Group

Published: Wednesday, April 13, 2011, 4:17 PM   Updated: Wednesday, April 13, 2011, 4:31 PM

By Bruno R Tedeschi/Jaffe Communications

The Center for Autism at The North Ward Center kicked off Autism Awareness Month with the first MOM2MOM workshop on Wednesday, April 6.

MOM2MOM is a 24-hour helpline staffed by peer counselors to assist mothers of special needs children in Union and Essex counties in dealing with their everyday stress. The helpline, (877) 514-MOM2, is operated by University Behavioral HealthCare, a division of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ).

"Even though I’m trying to offer services and provide help, just listening and being able to give back to someone else has been so valuable to me," said Knox, a Newark native and mother of a 14-year-old autistic child. "Talking to other moms is very rewarding and therapeutic for me because I can finally find someone who knows what I’m going through, and I know what they’re going through."

At the focus group, participating moms shared stories about the hardships and joys of caring for their children. They talked about the everyday struggles of dealing with their children’s behavioral problems but also spoke about the rare moments when their children are able to express affection toward them.

Participants also completed needs assessments to determine what kinds of services need to be made available in Newark. They answered questions about their role as a caregiver for a child with special needs.
and its impact on their mental health. The focus group attendees made it clear that there is a strong need for more educational, after-school and transitional programs for special needs children.

"Partnering with the North Ward Center is one way to gauge the needs of moms in that community, connect with them directly, and share MOM2MOM's and the North Ward Center's resources," Castellano said.

Knox said speaking to other moms who have children of all age ranges has provided her with strength and encouragement.

"Even though I know it's hard at times, when I talk to someone with an adult autistic child, I know it's going to be okay," Knox said. "I'm talking to someone who's been through it all and knows my struggle. It helps keep my focus strong and it gives me strength to keep striving and not give in to the pressure."

Knox said MOM2MOM has been greatly expanding since it first began in November 2010. She said they have received calls from moms in other states who want to model the program.

"When my son was diagnosed 12 years ago I honestly had never even heard of autism and now it's come full circle," Knox said. "We're here right now standing in The Center for Autism in the city of Newark. It's a blessing."

"In the year since it was launched, the Center for Autism has become a valuable resource in Newark for families with autism," said Michele Adubato, the executive director of The North Ward Center and the founder of the Center for Autism. "Autism Awareness Month is an opportune time to expand our outreach so more families in the urban environment can benefit from the critical information we are able to provide."

Knox said that children are being diagnosed earlier, allowing for early intervention, but there is still much more progress to be made.

"This program is about putting moms on the phone, with psychologists backing them up, training them how to do peer support on the phone, teaching them how to do support groups, teaching them how to do awareness advocacy," Castellano said.

Diane Lamboy, who attended the focus group, said there is an urgent need for MOM2MOM in Newark.

"We definitely need more MOM2MOM group sessions," said Lamboy, a mother of a 10-year-old autistic child. "Today it felt like a great amount of stress and pressure was released, and it's comforting and reassuring just knowing that I'm not alone."

Lamboy said she knows other moms who would greatly benefit from the group and is eager to volunteer her time on the hotline.

Autism Awareness Month will continue at the Center on Tuesday, April 12 from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m., with Handwriting Without Tears presented by Nereida Meloi, an occupational therapist and Anne Pereira, a special education teacher. The workshop will be held at The North Ward Center, 346 Mount Prospect Avenue.

Handwriting Without Tears is a hands-on, educationally sound instructional method to teach handwriting and is easily adaptable to children with special needs.

On Wednesday, April 14 at 4:30, Dr. Isabel DeTrizio Carotenuto, a neurodevelopmental pediatrician, is scheduled to give a one-hour talk on dietary interventions for children with autism at the Center for Autism at 341 Roseville Avenue.

Carotenuto, who has more than 20 years experience in the autism field, specializes in early diagnosis, evaluation and long-range treatment of children within the autism spectrum disorder. She was the director of child development at the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. She also was the medical director of the Child Evaluation Center at John F. Kennedy Medical Center in Edison.

The final workshop is scheduled for April 28 from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. to be held at the Center for Autism at 341 Roseville Avenue. It will feature Christian Meneses, a speech language specialist, who will be discussing functional communication in the environment.

"We are confident that members of the community will find these workshops invaluable," Adubato said. "We urge families with autism to try to come to at least one of the sessions."

© 2011 NJ.com. All rights reserved.