

McHenry County Mental Health Board

620 Dakota Street • Crystal Lake, Illinois 60012

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Contact: Barbara Iehl 815-455-2828 rbiehl@mc708.org

Mental Health Board member retires after 25 years of service

After 25 years of leadership and service on the McHenry County Mental Health Board, Beverly Thomas is moving on to work in other areas of need in the community. She maintains that change is necessary for personal growth, and that it is the right time to encourage others to take on the work of guiding the Mental Health Board (MHB) in working for the delivery of the best behavioral healthcare services for county residents.

Thomas will step down from the Board of the McHenry County Mental Health Board at the end of 2009. County residents are invited to honor Thomas at a reception on January 25 from 4 to 5:30 p.m. at Family Service and Community Mental Health Center, 4100 Veterans Parkway in McHenry. Thomas is turning her time and energy toward her role on the 22nd Judicial Circuit Family Violence Coordinating Council. She is also one of the coordinators of the People in Need Forum scheduled this year for January 30 at McHenry County College, and she will continue to serve on the McHenry County Behavioral Health Foundation.

Thomas has been a leader in the field of disability services since 1977 when she served as the first director of the Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association. Since then, as president and member of the board of directors of the MHB, she has guided the implementation of an integrated Behavioral Health network of McHenry county providers to deliver exceptional services to those with mental health, substance abuse, traumatic brain injury and developmental disabilities.

She was also instrumental in the administration of McHenry County's first funding for the Crisis Line and Mental Health Onsite Emergency Response, Consumer Credit Counseling Services, Jail Screening, Senior Day Services, Victims of Domestic Violence Services, Latino Liaison Services, Clinic for Uninsured Families, Traumatic Brain Injury Services, and Center for Recovery for Adults with chronic, severe mental illness. Other accomplishments include working to develop and fund the first residential group home for the mentally ill in the county in partnership with the

McHenry County National Alliance for the Mentally Ill; initiating—in partnership with Thresholds—the first Psychosocial Rehabilitation/Clubhouse program in the county; and supporting the country’s first Recovery Specialists program providing peer-to-peer support for persons with severe mental illness. Thomas also worked to secure the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s grant—“Family CARE –a Child Mental Health Initiative”—to transform systems of care for children and youth. On behalf of the Illinois Association of Community Mental Health Authorities, Thomas worked with legislators to amend the Community Mental Health Act to separate mental health funds from county funds, which became state law.

Additionally, Thomas was twice awarded United Way’s Volunteer of the Year award for working to organize hundreds of volunteers in the county and substantially increasing fundraising profits to benefit county residents with behavioral health, substance abuse, and/or developmental disabilities. She has been the only volunteer to receive this prestigious award twice. She also received the 2008 Advocacy Award from the Association of Community Mental Health Authorities of Illinois.

The nine member McHenry County Mental Health Board was established by referendum in 1969 as a result of the Community Mental Health Act. This act provides for counties in Illinois to allocate tax dollars for the treatment services for residents who are mentally ill, developmentally disabled, or chemically dependent. Thomas joined the Board Policy and Management Committee in 1980 and has served as a member of the Board or as its president since that time.

As a result of ever growing population and compounding problems, the real and always immediate challenge for the Mental Health Board has been to adequately address, plan for and meet head-on the tremendous need presented to them to provide for quality mental health services for McHenry County residents, including increased numbers of clients with severe disabilities; decreased state funding; the rising costs of services; and the growing under and uninsured population that has impacted the whole service system.

“Her leadership in McHenry County, like a high tide raising all the boats, has raised the level of service throughout the state,” said Gilbert Zych, a past president of ACMHAI and the executive director of Lyons Township Mental Health Commission in southwest suburban Cook County after she received the 2008 Advocacy Award from the Association of Community Mental Health Authorities of Illinois. Zych has known Thomas in her role as president of the McHenry County MHB for more than two decades and notes that under her leadership the MHB has

identified and fostered key amendments to the Illinois Community Mental Health Act, a law that creates and governs all mental health boards in the state.

“She is a strong advocate for those affected by mental illness,” said Sandy Lewis, MHB executive director. “Her strong belief in collaboration and keeping up with the best available treatment has brought service providers to work together to provide the residents of McHenry County with the best and most innovation programs. She is an amazing lady. No doubt about it.”

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