**Systems Change is a Grassroots Effort**  
*How AMOS is Affecting Change in Central Iowa’s Mental Health Care System*

Central Iowa’s next social movement could be starting right now — in the living room next door.

For almost 20 years, neighbors have gathered in homes across the region to discuss their most pressing issues and determine how to make a difference. Are you thinking “Iowa caucuses” right now? Think again.

These “gatherings of neighbors” aren't voting on candidates for political office. Instead, they are committed to nonpartisanship and to raising voices seldom heard in traditional politics.

“Our focus is on people who are left out. We have a bias toward poverty and issues of human need — that is our primary lens,” says Paul Turner, lead organizer for A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy (AMOS).

Led mostly by volunteers, AMOS is made up of 28 member institutions representing a variety of religions and social causes. Its organizing work starts by identifying key issues through hundreds of small group meetings and culminates in action, bringing solutions to policy and decision makers.

“More and more people are disengaged from the political process. We think the best way to be political is in a nonpartisan way; building relationships across lines of division,” says Turner.

**Mental Health Care Raised as a Top Concern**

Mental health is clearly an issue that crosses socioeconomic and demographic lines. And within the last decade, stresses related to mental health care have risen to being among the top three concerns consistently raised at AMOS house meetings.

“When we investigated the issue a few years ago, Iowa ranked forty-sixth or seventh in the nation for the ratio of mental health professionals to citizens. We had a workforce shortage and we still do,” says Bob Glass, retired social work professional and co-leader of AMOS’s mental health issues research team.

In addition to gathering existing data, the team met with over 40 providers and agencies to gain an insider’s perspective on the challenges affecting central Iowa’s mental health system. Several issues surfaced: poor access to services, shortage of acute and sub-acute beds, low wages and reimbursement rates, insufficient funding and a stigma surrounding mental illness, among others.
“Mental health is so complex. There is never going to be any one solution. We have to come at it from many angles,” says Turner.

Organizing on Several Fronts

“One of the biggest things we provide the community is often underestimated,” says Glass. “We provide space for all concerned — providers, agencies, policy influencers and funders — to come together and communicate in a way they don’t get to do anywhere else.”

This coalition, which has been meeting several times a year since 2011, leverages knowledge, resources and multiple perspectives to learn about and take action on central Iowa’s most pressing mental health care issues.

“Mid-Iowa Health Foundation was a lead funder that helped bring the coalition together,” says Turner.

Partnering with the Des Moines chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness and other entities, the organizing efforts of AMOS and the coalition were integral to the passage of Iowa’s mental health care re-design during the 2012 Iowa legislative session. In addition to furthering policy, AMOS and its many partners are also working to

- Reduce the stigma of mental illness
- Ensure better access to care
- Expand the mental health care workforce
- Promote integration of care

AMOS is also starting to turn its attention toward children’s mental health because, according to Glass, that system was not part of the 2012 mental health care re-design.

Moving Forward

Whether it’s reducing stigma, improving access to care or another critical issue, improving mental health care in central Iowa is complex, expensive and occasionally mindboggling. But through the forces of collaboration and mobilization, AMOS and its many partners are committed to continuing to move the needle forward.

“Power comes in two forms. Organized money and organized people,” says Turner. “We have organized people.”

— Sherry Speikers is a communications consultant working with nonprofits in central Iowa. You can reach her at sherry@speikerscomm.com.