

ARMENIAN AMERICAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA: GENESIS, MISSION, VALUES, GOALS, STRATEGIES, AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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California is a large and densely populated state, comprised of 58 counties, which are administrative divisions of the State. Los Angeles County is the largest county in California, with large Armenian American (AA) communities within its borders. LA County's Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) in turn is the largest county-based mental health department in California.

LACDMH operates a spectrum of mental health services intended for people of all ages and backgrounds. One of the cornerstones of LACDMH's mission is to empower underserved cultural communities (<https://dmh.lacounty.gov/about/mhsa/uscc/>). Historically the Armenian community living in LA County has been an underrepresented, poorly understood, and underserved ethnic population.

A decade ago officials of LACDMH approached AA mental health professionals, and asked them to develop a mental health association, which would focus on the mental health needs and education of the Community, and help LADMH increase culturally competent preventive and recovery-services specific to the Armenian community. After many months of meetings and discussions, a group of psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage and family therapists, and social workers created the Armenian American Mental Health Association (AAMHA), which later became a non-profit organization, and was officially incorporated in April of 2009.

Mission: The mission of AAMHA is to advance mental health education in the AA community, as well as help increase the availability and quality of culturally sensitive and appropriate mental health services across the County for Armenians. Activities and programs developed and implemented by AAMHA are based on funds comprised of member dues and grants. Members are not financially compensated for their time and effort.

Values

AAMHA's mission and activities are based on the following values and goals:

- Culture has impact on world view and mental health;
- AA community should be integrated in majority structures;
- Prevention of mental/emotional problems is possible through education/information;
- Maintenance of high professional standards/ethics/conduct are important.
- Education in cultural sensitivity is important for providers;

- Providers need involvement in discussions, consultations, referrals, information exchange, networking and support to provide good care;
- It's important to assess mental health needs of the AA community;
- Mental health policies should address mental health needs;
- It's important to promote community research; and
- It's important to inform community of available mental health resources.

Membership: Dues paying members are psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage and family therapists, social workers, and other mental health professionals of Armenian heritage. Members are encouraged to serve on committees which fulfill the mission of the Association. Active members take advantage of networking and continuing education, opportunities to be involved in the development and implementation of educational programs for peers and the Community, and serve as mental health advocates for the community.

Committees: AAMHA has four standing committees, and each committee is chaired by a Board member.

1) Membership and Outreach Committee is responsible for:

- Promoting the Association mission and programs;
- Recruiting new members; and
- Maintaining contact with members.

2) Education and Programs Committee is responsible for:

- Organizing educational events for AAMHA members, non-member professionals, and AA community;
- Organizing events for better integration of the Community in the majority culture; and
- Developing and delivery of culturally appropriate educational conferences, lectures, meetings, TV shows, art therapy session for the Community.

3) Social Committee is responsible for the:

- Planning, organizing, and implementing all networking and fundraising events; and
- Recruiting sponsors and developing funds for the events.

4) Website Committee manages the website (<https://www.aamhawest.org/>). The website contains information on mission, goals, activities, committees, events, news, resources, member directory, gallery, and contact information. Communication with members and non-members are conducted through the website. The website Committee is responsible for the maintenance of the website, which includes:

- Updating of the website and other social media platforms;
- Developing and posting announcements/flyers about events;
- Posting open positions for licensed and pre-licensed professionals;
- Communication with members and non-members; and
- Archiving of information on i-cloud.

Accomplishments: Over the last decade AAMHA has endeavored to fulfill its mission fully. Boards of Directors have continuously addressed the continuing educational needs of mental health professionals (Armenian and non-Armenians alike) who render care to the AA community, as well as the mental health needs of the Community.

A variety of educational methods have been utilized, such as conferences, health fairs, lectures, workshops, consultations, art-therapy, TV shows, review of dissertations; administration of data collection for research conducted by members; etc. Great effort has been expended in selecting venues for events (e.g., universities, community centers; libraries, etc.) which provide easy access to events for targeted audiences within the Armenian community.

To demonstrate how AAMHA selects topics, audiences, and venues for educational activities, one can consider a conference titled "Trans-generational Trauma Following the Armenian Genocide: Developmental Perspectives, Healing, and Empowerment." This event took place in 2015, to coincide with the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide. The aim of the conference was to deal with the psychological, social, intellectual, physical and spiritual trauma sustained by the Armenians over the last century.

An elite group of Armenian and non-Armenian trauma experts (i.e., psychologists, politicians, academicians/researchers, movie producers, and artists), were recruited to explicate the complexity of collective trauma (vis-a-vi the Armenia and Rwandan Genocides, and the Jewish Holocaust). Speakers reflected on the psychological/social/political/economic/cultural aspects of trauma suffered by survivors, nature and depth of vicarious trans-generational trauma, and the phases of collective response across generations. They further discussed the importance of healing and empowerment of generations that come after the trauma.

A large audience comprised of more than 400 Armenians and non-Armenians, from many walks of life and socio/economic/educational backgrounds filled the conference hall of a central college located in Glendale. High school and college students and faculty were given academic credit for attending this conference. This one-day event was advertised broadly through a variety of methods, and was free of charge to attend. This event was covered by the media, and had a major impact on the audience as well as local governmental structures, who have continued offering similar approaches to dealing with collective trauma.

In closing it should be noted that active members provide their expert services through AAMHA for the benefit of the AA community with great dedication. Most importantly, they consider such service to the Armenian community as a privilege, and an effective way of "paying forward" to a community which they call their own.