

NEW BRUNSWICK — Fortright and forward, those at Laurel House are never ones to mince words. They can't afford it.

A safe haven where people with ongoing mental health issues can come, Laurel House works hard to fulfill this goal. With its clubhouse setting, Laurel House provides its members a place to be — to gain support, learn to work and rebuild their lives. They focus on wellness and abilities, rather than illness.

At Laurel House, the stigma of mental illness is erased, and building confidence and skills are key. Now, key to their continuance is financial support. They will be forced to close this spring should they not find ample financial support for their mission.

“To put it bluntly, we need money,” founder and board President Annette Mayo said. “We need help with ongoing funding.”

While Laurel House has been a past recipient of generosity both privately and publicly, most funding is not for ongoing operating support. Having looked into procuring grants and applying for funds, Director Deborah Kaufman said, “many don't offer general operating support. We need money to simply operate day to day, and most funds offered are for new programs.

“We have received funds from the Middlesex County freeholders and start-up funds from Robert Wood Johnson. Bristol-Myers has been very generous. The problem is that we are always searching for funding, for everyday operating expenses.”

Unlike many other states, New Jersey does not grant funds to “clubhouses,” which is Laurel House's category. Laurel House is one of 300 clubhouses globally that cater to those with mental illness. There are clubhouses in 35 states and 28 countries.

“Our program is unique in New Jersey. We are the currently the only one. We need state funds, but they are nonexistent,” Kaufman said. “The clubhouse formation is not recognized in this state. We have a very tight budget of \$150,000 annually. We are always spending our time trying to procure ongoing funds. We can't keep going like this year after year.”

“Most states support this concept financially. We don't know why New Jersey does not,” Mayo added. “We keep them out of mental hospitals, which saves the state money. We try to get them back to work.”

Kaufman and her staff, which includes full-time employee Allison Powers and part-timer Darryl Barnes, and members have sent letters, many of them penned by clubhouse members, to everyone they can think of — from the city and county to the state and federal levels.

In his letter, “Ray” noted that Laurel House was “a life-changing experience for him.” Though trained in graphic arts, the advent of computers kept him from his profession until he was taught the basics at Laurel House.

“Before I knew it, I was asked to be the editor of, and graphic artist for, the monthly newsletter. Now I have a place I can go every day where I am not judged for my illness,” he wrote. “I am a Vietnam veteran who could not find help anywhere but UMDNJ (the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey) and at Laurel House. Whenever I have questions, the staff points me in the right direction. This clubhouse is very important to my well-being.”

“Thomas” agreed and noted in his letter that through Laurel House, he has reunited with family after an 18-year absence.

“This has made me so happy. I found out that I am a grandfather. If I wouldn't have been here using the computers, none of this would have happened,” he said. “Please help us keep our doors open, not only for me, but for those who will come after me. We have affected many lives, before I got here, and will continue to do so.”

“Cathleen” explained in her letter that on any given day, she does a whole range of jobs, and as an artist, she has shown her work in the annual Laurel House Art Show.

“I model my paintings after Vincent Van Gogh,” she said. “I have even sold a few. I hope to work again part time with the help of the staff here at Laurel House.”

Laurel House constantly holds fundraisers, Kaufman said.

“We have had two successful art shows and sold some pieces. We had a major fundraiser at The Heldrich Hotel, where they also displayed more of our members’ artwork. We also made a series of note cards with their artwork, which are for sale.”

Having considered a grant writer to help them, Kaufman was informed that the cost is prohibitive — almost as much as Laurel House’s annual budget.

“It is hard to go to request money. We need help and someone or some agency to tell us how to get a funding stream — from the state or a generous benefactor,” Kaufman said. “There are many money-funding streams out there. I know that. Medicaid funds day programs, but we are not considered a day program.”

Among other agencies, Laurel House clubhouse is one of a kind, Mayo said. At 316 Livingston Ave. in New Brunswick, Laurel House is modeled after a New York City organization called The Fountain House, which was created 60 years ago and has more than 2,000 members.

Though technically only 3½ years old, the seeds for Laurel House were planted in 1964, when Mayo and her late husband, Ralph Mayo, created Camp Laurel, a summer day camp for brain-injured children. Mayo’s passion comes from her own “Laurel,” her daughter, who likes to be called Laura.

“My daughter is 53, and I am her support emotionally and financially,” Mayo said. “Many of our members have parents who are passed on or not interested. They may not have siblings that can or want to help.”

Laurel House rents its home from NAMI, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, and once inside visitors and members are treated to a tidy, homey atmosphere. Brightly decorated with members’ artwork, Laurel House boasts a library, kitchen, main office area, computer room, dining room, exercise area and conference room, as well as a member-tended garden in the summer.

There also is an office for the monthly newsletter, and the Middlesex County chapter of NAMI keeps an office on site. With 128 members, it is the members who take care of their house, though none actually reside at the premises.

“Laurel House is some place to come to where they know their work is needed, wanted and appreciated,” Kaufman said. “That is the first step in recovery. They gain skills here, and confidence. Then they are ready to do transition to a job. There is an amazing difference a job makes in recovery. With a job, it gives some freedom, and they have a little money.”

As its programs compliment existing mental health services in the community, Laurel House gives its members a place to go. There are groups based on common interests, such as the Arts Group. Members can participate in twice-monthly social events that are fun and free. Friendships are formed. A family is created.

“Many were isolated before,” Mayo said. “Some have family, some have support. Many, many do not. When they were younger and had schooling, they had a place to go. Once they graduated, it was more like, ‘Now what do I do?’ ”

“We are a first step in getting people back into the community,” Kaufman said.

Members of Laurel House wholeheartedly agree with Kaufman and Mayo. In their letters, “Norman” and “Patricia” stated that they would “just stay home” without Laurel House.

“I would stagnate,” Norman said. “The clubhouse provides me a sort of structure that I wouldn’t have if it were not available to me.”

“I would be at home depressed,” Patricia added. “I have met new friends here. We support each other. It would be very hard on us if Laurel House shut down.”

Once a member of Laurel House, you are a member for life.

“Now we have 128 members,” Kaufman said. “We are growing faster than we can physically keep up. For instance, we hate to turn away anyone from transportation, but we only have one van and one part-time driver. Most of our members can’t drive, so that precludes them from coming here or going to jobs, unless we can help them. We would like to be able to expand with another van and driver. Instead of three hours a day, do four hours. We have a waiting list for transportation on Mondays and Fridays.”

Noting that Laurel House is even open on holidays, Kaufman said, “it is important that members have a place to go on the holidays. Many do not have family, but they have us. We are their family.”

“Belonging is so necessary for people with mental illness,” she added. “Holidays are so hard for those with mental illness. We have dinner on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. They even got Christmas gifts from the board of directors.”

Members are essential to clubhouse operations, which are based on the work-order day concept. This plan gives structure and meaning to the members. The day begins with a group meeting in the morning, when the day’s jobs are discussed and disseminated.

“Members do different jobs every day,” Kaufman said. “Coming here is voluntary. Some come every day, some come only certain days. As they graduate from other programs, we are here for them. We transition from maybe two days to three days and add on days as they acclimate.”

“They help here with so much. There is daily cleaning and cleanup, mailings, all the clerical work, such as phones and record keeping, help with the house inside and out,” Mayo added. “One of the most important things they do is reaching out to other members by phone.”

From working at Laurel House, members, when ready, transition into the TEP (Transitional Employment Placement) program, in which where they are placed into local jobs. Some of these have been at the North Brunswick Public Library, ShopRite or with NAMI. From this placement, which usually is a six-to-nine-month employment, members may elect to move into full-time jobs through the Laurel House Supported Employment Program.

“We do need more employers to work with us,” Kaufman said. “It is difficult because it is for short stints, but we want to try to get our members to try different things. We do find that employers do not want to let them go. They are very good workers who appreciate the work and are dedicated.”

Laurel House, through its function, is an asset to the mental health community. The mentally ill community is one that is large and growing, Mayo said.

If anyone is interested in helping Laurel House, either financially or joining its board of directors or giving in any other way, from teaching and employing to donating and volunteering, call Kaufman at 732-246-0028.