

**NAMI OF OCEAN COUNTY  
RAMP, RENAUD & HLAVENKA**

**PRESS RELEASE**

**ATTORNEY ANN RENAUD CALLS FOR SWEEPING CHANGES IN  
COURT SYSTEM TO ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (Toms River, NJ Oct. 13, 2010) – East Brunswick attorney Ann Renaud discussed the challenges mentally ill people face when dealing with the legal system at a meeting today of the Ocean County chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Ms. Renaud said the judicial system needs to be remade in a way that deals with mental health issues and drug dependency with compassion and understanding.

“The system is radically broken, but I am by nature a believer that if a problem exists it can be solved,” she said. “There is no continuity in the system. It sucks the life out of treatment rather than assisting in providing it. The criminal justice system has been substituted for the mental health hospitals. We’re just handing over our mentally ill to prosecutors and judges who have no training at all in solving these problems.”

Ms. Renaud said lawmakers and court officials have created a system that is simply inadequate. It hurts the people who need special help as well the communities that will eventually have to deal with them after they’ve failed to receive that help.

“Our first responders often do not respond appropriately,” she said. “Think about a police officer happening upon an individual having a heart attack. The officer orders him to stop having a heart attack. The person continues to have a heart attack and the officer says, ‘If you don’t stop having that heart attack I am going to have to lock you up.’ The person continues to have his heart attack and the officer says, ‘I warned you about having that heart attack’ and slaps him in handcuffs and sticks him in a jail cell.

“If something like that really happened the community would ask for that officer’s resignation and would be outraged by the cruelty,” Ms. Renaud said. “But this is what happens to the mentally ill every day of the week.”

She discussed better training for police officers and the Memphis, Tenn., model of crisis intervention teams (CIT) that has worked successfully. The mental health court model in conjunction with the CIT programs has been shown to reduce recidivism in the jurisdictions that have them by as high as 67 percent, she said.

“The numbers are radical,” Ms. Renaud said. “Our courts need to be seamlessly tied into the treatment providers so that there is not a gap between what is ordered and what is actually provided.”

She said the courts should focus on diverting people with mental health issues out of the criminal justice system and into appropriate treatment programs.

“The worst thing that can happen to the mentally ill is to add a criminal conviction to their resume because it virtually guarantees that they will have little luck finding a decent job,” Ms. Renaud said. “I believe most people want to do the right thing. If they understood the problem the way we who live with it do, they would be appalled at what happens to the mentally ill when they are in crisis.”

Ms. Renaud noted the extraordinary efforts of the Ocean County chapter of NAMI to bring change to the system. Leaders of the chapter have held discussions with local municipal court judges, provided police training and lobbied the county to establish crisis intervention teams. They’ve gotten the county prosecutor to agree to a diversionary program for mentally ill defendants involved in minor offenses.

“All of these efforts show the system can be changed, one step at a time, and I applaud Ocean County for being well ahead of the curve on this issue,” she said.

Ms. Renaud has called on Gov. Chris Christie to create mental health courts and to dedicate greater resources for research into mental illnesses and to bring insurance reimbursement for mental health services on par with other health services.

“If our court system continues to view people with mental illnesses and special needs only in terms of labels, this needless suffering is going to continue,” Ms. Renaud said.

### **About NAMI**

New Jersey is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families who are affected by mental illness. The Ocean County Chapter of NAMI is located in Toms River.

### **About Ramp, Renaud & Hlavenka**

The East Brunswick, NJ, law firm of Ramp, Renaud & Hlavenka, LLC provides its clients with in-depth expertise across all its practice areas—the sort of knowledge that enables its lawyers to chart successful strategies and deliver winning outcomes. Making that proficiency even more powerful is the meticulous preparation that goes into every case. The firm's attorneys treat every client with kindness and compassion. They understand that when individuals reach out to a lawyer, they are seeking help with their most personal and pressing problems.

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