

The Rosalynn Carter Fellowships for Mental Health Journalism

Mental health issues often do not receive the mass-media attention they deserve. Although mental illnesses are among the most serious and unrecognized health problems in the United States, affecting one-fifth of people at some point in their lives, most Americans know little about them. According to *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General* (1999), the disease burden of mental illnesses is slightly more than that of all cancers combined. Because of the lack of available information, however, the myths and mystery surrounding mental illnesses persist, perpetuating stigma and discrimination.

Editors and reporters have unique opportunities to provide mental health information to the public. In hopes of encouraging accurate and outstanding mental health reporting, the Rosalynn Carter Fellowships for Mental Health Journalism are awarded each year to six domestic and two or more international journalists to produce a significant project on mental health or mental illnesses. Each fellow receives \$10,000 and visits the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, at the beginning and end of the fellowship year to meet with other fellows and Journalism Fellowship Advisory Board members.

The fellowships are an outgrowth of former First Lady Rosalynn Carter's long-time interest in mental health. Actively involved with the fellowship program, Mrs Carter explains that "there is tremendous potential for journalists to improve the public's understanding of mental health issues and to play a critical role in reducing stigma and discrimination against people with mental illnesses".

Recipients of the fellowships remain in their work environments during the fellowship year while completing their proposed projects. The Carter Center Mental Health Program stays actively involved with the fellows by providing access to mental health information and to a cadre of mental health experts and former fellows.

Each fellow is paired with a Journalism Fellowship Advisory Board member, who helps to finalize the design of the project

and guide its completion. Members of the Advisory Board include prominent experts on mental health and on journalism.

Sixty-eight reporters and editors have been granted fellowships over nine classes. Fellowship projects have included many newspaper and magazine series, some national radio pieces, four published books, and five television documentaries. Fellows have garnered several prestigious awards and nominations for their projects, including two nominations for Pulitzer prizes.

Fellowship projects have provided in-depth coverage of complex issues. Topics have included the treatment of people with mental illnesses in prisons at the hands of impaired physicians; mental health in managed-care settings; and suicide causes, prevention, and support resources.

Increasingly, the fellowship program is identifying opportunities to hold discussions with editors about the challenges and obstacles related to mental health reporting. In June 2004, more than 350 editors and investigative reporters attended a panel at the Carter Center to address issues related to investigating mental health and trauma.

In a recent survey, all fellows agreed that the fellowships furthered their ability to report accurately on mental health issues. In addition, the fellowships have changed attitudes. Says recent fellow Caroline S Clauss-Ehlers: "The fellowship in and of itself has been destigmatizing. That there is a fellowship focused on mental health seems to validate people's experiences and give them permission to talk about these issues. I found this to be true for both editors as well as readers."

REBECCA G PALPANT is program development coordinator, the Rosalynn Carter Fellowships for Mental Health Journalism, Mental Health Program, the Carter Center (www.cartercenter.org), and KATIE HAWKINS is a student at Georgia State University and former program assistant with the Rosalynn Carter Fellowships for Mental Health Journalism.