The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence-NJ's Advocacy Leadership Program gathered its fifth class in Trenton on the last weekend of September.

This further bolstered an effort that has put the state at the forefront of the nation in establishing an addiction issues constituency. With the 2012's 29 members, the program has now graduated 134 leaders and has enlisted another 60 leadership partners, all of whom are dedicated to assailing the persistent challenges that arise from stigma.

The program, whose first class was convened in 2008, has convened a class each of the past five years for a two-day retreat in the state's capital. Over the course of a year, participants receive trainings on subjects that cover telling one's story of recovery, the legislative process, addiction issues such as treating non-violent offenders, and the state budget. Like its predecessors, this class will use the trainings to hone testimony given before legislative committees, address the Department of Human Services commissioner and key staff, conduct forums on addiction as a brain disease and stigma reduction, and communicate with the media.

At the recent training, NCADD-NJ CEO and President Wayne Wirta reviewed the agency's long history of fighting the stigma that has challenged people in active addiction trying to access treatment and people in recovery working to put their lives back in order. This work began when Marty Mann became the first woman in long-term recovery and made it her mission to advocate for the many she knew were still in the throes of alcoholism or other addiction. Wirta stressed that in spite of the more than sixty years since the American Medical Association first recognized alcoholism as a disease, "stigma is alive and well." The reason for that, he said, is that people in recovery tend to return to normal lives and so go unnoticed, while people still in active addiction are "very visible."

The first four Advocacy Leadership classes have made clear inroads with policy-makers. For instance, whereas lawmakers once felt treatment for addiction was too costly, recently they have asked, "how much would it cost" to treat a given number of people. This shift owes largely to testimony and consistent messaging of the Advocacy Leaders.

Advocacy Trainer Aaron Kucharski asked to hear from several members of the new class about their reasons for joining the effort. Abby Boxman of Freehold lost a son to an opiate overdose – there could be no more powerful motivator to become involved. She will not be alone among the leaders in trying to ensure that a child's death from drugs serves to build awareness of this problem's pervasiveness. It was not a child but many friends who Rich Kurdek said inspired him to step forward.

Two of the new class members spoke about issues that had received little attention. Laura Collins described herself as advocate for medicated assisted treatment. Even within the recovery community, some resist the idea that people using methadone or suboxone can truly say they are in recovery. A very different issue inspired Rich Alexander, who said he wanted to promote "prosperity in recovery" for the many people whose lives are stable but who have not

flourished in their recovery.

Kucharski spoke of past classes and how they regularly exceeded what was asked of them. The Department of Human Services budget hearing last year saw more addiction advocates by far than represented any other group. He also recalled the post card campaign of a few years ago. During that initiative, Leaders visited every legislative district office in the state in a single day, a so-called Day of Advocacy. And the various listening and educational forums that regional teams have held have drawn standing room crowds.

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