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San Jose Mercury News
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Regarding: OP-ED Piece Psycho Donuts

The California Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) has serious concerns about the new eatery in Campbell, California named “Psycho Donuts” and its marketing strategy. Although the owners might have meant to be “cool and funny” they are, in fact, promoting stigma and discrimination towards individuals with severe mental health problems and mental illness. In addition to its name and menu selection drawing upon mental health terms, sales staff dress as psychotic lab characters, or persons in white lab coats. Their décor not only includes a padded cell where children can take a photo opportunity while wearing a straight jacket but also a “group therapy” seating area. Their menu features items such as “Manic Malt,” “Massive Head Trauma,” “Split Personality,” or the “Bipolar.” The owners of “Psycho Donuts” perpetuate the continued ignorance towards mental health issues and amplify erroneous beliefs about mental health recovery.

Stigma is commonly defined as the use of stereotypes and labels when describing a person. Stereotypes are often attached to people with a mental illness. Stigma is what keeps many people from seeking the help they need. The negativity and misunderstanding that often surrounds mental illnesses fosters prejudice and discrimination, diminishing human dignity, creating fear and shame, and adding unnecessary pain to people who are already struggling. Stigma goes far beyond the misuse of words and information, it is about disrespect. Unfortunately, our society tends to not give the same acceptance to mental illness as it does to other health concerns, such as heart disease. The stigma surrounding these misunderstandings can limit opportunities, stand in the way of a new job, increase feelings of loneliness, and cause many other unfortunate outcomes.

In its efforts to reduce stigma and discrimination against individuals with mental illness, the MHSOAC wrote a policy paper entitled, *Eliminating Stigma and Discrimination Against Persons With Mental Health Disabilities*, June 2007. The document stresses that

the media, such as radio and television stations, novels, newspapers and movies have portrayed and continue to portray individuals with mental illness as violent and pathetic victims, using the element of comedy. This portrayal has been adopted by some in our society, whose sentiments and reactions towards individuals with mental illness are guided by fear and mistrust.

In a similar vein, the National Council on Disability (NCD) poignantly stated in their March 2008 paper, *Inclusive Livable Communities for People with Psychiatric Disabilities*, that society's deep-seated negative attitudes toward mental illness create real obstacles for people with psychiatric disabilities, as they attempt to be part of the many aspects of community living. In addition, this internalized stigma of having a psychiatric disability keeps individuals locked in a state of hopelessness because their immediate and extended support network, such as family members, physicians, teachers, or employers accept the notion of limited opportunities.

Using exaggerated themes of psychiatric diagnosis and treatment, Psycho Donuts reinforces stereotypical beliefs about mental illness held by society. The owners defend their beliefs by stating that society has become politically sensitive with little room for a sense of humor. They offer a simple solution that those people disagreeing with their marketing strategy should buy doughnuts elsewhere; or, they should spend their time on what the owners consider "bigger problems in the world." However, for people living with mental illness and their families, the fight against the stigma associated with mental illness constitutes their "bigger problem" and we believe this is a societal problem for everyone to solve.

Sincerely,

Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC)



Andrew Poat, Chair



Larry Poaster, Vice-Chair



Linford Gayle, Commissioner

cc: Kip Berdiansky and Jordan Zweigoron, Owners of Psycho Donuts
Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors
Nancy Pena, Ph.D., Director of Mental Health Department, San José, CA
City Council Members of Campbell, California
Assembly Member Jim Beall, 24th Assembly District