MISSISSIPPI STATE HOSPITAL
P.O. Box 157-A, Whitfield, MS 39193
Phone (601) 351-8018 Fax (601) 351-8364
www.msh.state.ms.us

For Immediate Release
October 27, 2006
Contact: Tim Durr (601) 351-8262, tldurr@msh.state.ms.us (Mississippi State Hospital)
Contact: Larry Swearengen (601) 899-9058, namimiss1@aol.com (NAMI Mississippi)

HALLOWEEN PLEA: “LOSE CRAZED, BLOODTHIRSTY ‘PSYCHO’ THEME”

JACKSON—Advocates for mental health in Mississippi are calling on creators of Halloween attractions and fright site organizers to drop mental illness themes from their celebrations this year.

Themes that include “psychiatric wards”, “insane asylums” and psychotic killers in straightjackets reinforce negative stereotypes and stigma that discourage individuals with mental illnesses from seeking treatment.

“Even though intended as fun, these violent stereotypes serve to perpetuate the stigma surrounding mental illness and are a frequent source of prejudice and discrimination that leads to social isolation and impedes an individual’s progress toward recovery,” said Larry Swearengen, executive director of the Mississippi chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

Swearengen said that companies, community groups and civic organizations that operate stigmatizing Halloween attractions often don’t realize they are contributing to a public health crisis. “They are unwittingly forcing our federal government and many state governments to spend more taxpayer dollars on anti-stigma campaigns in an attempt to offset the damage,” he said.

Some mental health advocates attribute the connection between Halloween and psychiatric disorders to horror writers and movies that portray mental patients escaping from institutions and going on violent killing rampages.

“Many people look at movies and develop the mindset that people with mental illnesses are extremely violent and dangerous,” said Dr. George Davis, clinical director for Mississippi State Hospital (MSH) at Whitfield, the nation’s largest public psychiatric hospital. “People who have a mental illness are no more violent or dangerous than someone suffering from any other serious illness. More often they are quiet, fearful, withdrawn and often the victims of violence.”

Davis said the media, movies and horror novels often depict mental patients in straightjackets or living in padded cells, when actually straightjackets and padded cells are not a part of the modern treatment process. “Mental illnesses can affect persons of any age, race, color or creed and are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing,” he said.

This type of negative stereotyping or stigma is what keeps many individuals from seeking treatment, according to Annette Giessner, president of NAMI Mississippi. “Stigma is one of the
leading barriers to mental healthcare,” Giessner said. “Many people refuse to seek treatment for mental disorders because they are afraid of what people will say about them.”

Ironically, the best treatments for serious mental illness today are highly effective, according to Dr. Davis. “Between 70 and 90 percent of individuals have significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life with a combination of pharmacological and psychosocial treatments and supports,” he said.

The key to successful treatment of mental illness is early identification and treatment, which is impeded by the fear, guilt, shame and isolation many individuals feel due to stigma, according to Davis. “By getting people the treatment they need early, recovery is accelerated and the brain is protected from further harm related to the course of illness.”

MSH Director James G. Chastain said that mental illness is a disease that affects the brain just as other diseases affect the body. “Mental illness ought to be considered like any other disease,” he said. “However, people do not view mental illness the way they do cancer, diabetes or heart disease.

“Some people view mental illness as something to be ashamed of, but it’s not,” Chastain said. “It’s no more of an embarrassment than a heart attack.”

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately 25 percent of all Americans suffer from mental illness. “Mental illness is more common than cancer and heart disease,” Chastain said. “However, many people who would not hesitate to receive treatment for a physical ailment refuse to get help for mental disorders.”

Mental health advocates said asking those celebrating Halloween to not use mental illness themes will hopefully bring attention to the problems stigma causes in treating these diseases. “Education and advocacy are our best weapons against stigma,” Chastain said.

###

NAMI Mississippi is part of the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of Mississippi residents living with serious mental illness and their families. NAMI Mississippi is one of the state’s leading voices on mental illness with chapters in 16 chapters statewide who join together to meet the NAMI mission through advocacy, research, support and education.

MSH, a facility of the Mississippi Department of Mental Health, was founded in 1855 and facilitates improvement in the quality of life for Mississippians who are in need of mental health, chemical dependency or nursing home services, by rehabilitating to the least restrictive environment, utilizing a range of psychiatric and medical services, which reflect the accepted standard of care and are in compliance with statutory and regulatory guidelines. MSH is the largest hospital in Mississippi and the largest public psychiatric facility in the United States.

Accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.