

Training and Development hosts mental health first aid training By Dennis Harpur

Mercy Behavioral Health's Training and Development Department recently partnered with Allegheny HealthChoices, Inc. (AHCI) to offer **Mental Health First Aid USA** training to 21 non-clinical/lay individuals from a variety of Pittsburgh-area community organizations. The course was taught by certified instructors **Jessica Strong** and **Matt Koren** from AHCI. Participating organizations included the Brashear Association, Community Human Services, **Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services**, and Northside Coalition for Fair Housing.

Similar to CPR and first aid training, **mental health first aid training** is an international, 12-hour certificate program that was developed in Australia and first introduced in the United States in 2008. The program is coordinated by the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the Missouri Department of Mental Health.

Mental health first aid provides initial help to a person showing symptoms of mental illness or in a mental health crisis (e.g. severe depression, psychosis, panic attack, or suicidal thoughts and behaviors) until appropriate professional or other help – including peer and family

support – can be engaged. The evidence-based training uses role-playing and simulations to demonstrate how to assess a mental health crisis, select appropriate interventions, and provide initial help. The training also addresses the risk factors and warning signs of specific illnesses, such as anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and substance use disorders.

“...the mental health first aid training program saves lives; improves the mental health of the individuals administering and receiving care; expands knowledge of mental illnesses and their treatments; increases the services provided; and reduces overall stigma by improving mental health literacy.”

- Source: www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org

More than 20,000 people nationwide have received mental health first aid training and over 1,200 instructors across the country are certified to teach the course. Additionally, the program has been successfully replicated in 14

countries, including England, Canada, Cambodia, Finland, Hong Kong, Ireland, Scotland, Singapore, and Wales.

Five published studies in Australia show that the mental health aid first aid training program saves lives; improves the mental health of the individuals administering and receiving care; expands knowledge of mental illnesses and their treatments; increases the services provided; and reduces overall stigma by improving mental health literacy. One trial of 301 randomized participants found that

those trained in mental health first aid have greater confidence in providing help to others, greater likelihood of advising people to seek professional help, improved concordance with health professionals about treatments, and decreased stigmatizing attitudes. Unexpectedly, the study also found that training improved the mental health of the participants themselves.

The Training and Development Department is investigating opportunities to offer the course again in the future.

Additional information on the mental health first aid training can be found at www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org. ■

Rave reviews for mental health first aid training

Below are what participants said about Mercy Behavioral Health and Allegheny HealthChoices' recent mental health first aid training:

“Three members of my team attended the mental health first aid training and absolutely loved it. They are eager to learn more and would recommend the trainings to all.”

- Amy Gorsuch,
community employment supervisor,
Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services

“It has helped me change some of my prejudices against people with some mental health issues. It has increased my understanding of how to recognize mental health symptoms.”

“It's an impressive course with an impressive amount of information... it enables people to better open the lines of communication in order to initiate getting someone help.”

“Good overall information on what to do and more importantly, what not to do in a crisis, and how to prevent escalation of a potential crisis.”



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