

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID TRAINING MINDS THE BUSINESS OF OUR COMMUNITY

Raising Awareness for a Happier, Healthier, Safer Community

By Bruce Blitman, Esq. and Cindy Wides, Jewish Family Service

Ferd & Gladys Alpert Jewish Family Service (Alpert JFS) is taking the lead in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), destigmatizing mental illness, and working to make mental health education as common as CPR training! The program is appropriate for everyone who has an interest in making a positive contribution to our community, but is particularly suited to lawyers. A demanding work schedule and stressful environment often result in work-life challenges. Many lawyers struggle with alcohol consumption, anxiety and depression. MHFA training provides the tools necessary to approach someone struggling with mental health issues, which can benefit colleagues and staff, clients, friends and family members.

The nationally renowned evidence-based training course teaches participants the skills to help someone developing a mental health problem, or experiencing a mental health crisis. It came to our community six years ago, through the efforts of Alpert JFS Clinical Director Elaine Rotenberg, Ph. D. and Director of Community Outreach/Mental Health First Aid Cindy Wides. Dr. Rotenberg heard about Mental Health First Aid at an out-of-state conference, and returned to Palm Beach County to research its presence in our community. At the time, there were just three instructors certified to teach. She assembled a group of funders to form a Coalition for Palm Beach County, introducing the concept to the group and raising funds to hire Wides. Together, they educated the community about the benefits of training. They also coordinated the efforts of four non-profit organizations to each allow a staff member to be trained nationally in order to teach MHFA locally.

The grassroots Palm Beach County Coalition Mental Health First Aid Coalition has experienced impressive growth since 2015; it now includes 16 non-profit agencies, the School District of Palm Beach County, and more than 80 nationally certified instructors. To date, more than 6,400 people received training to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illness and/or substance use disorders.

The program, on the Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and practices (NREPP), builds mental health literacy through a five-step action plan, teaching participants to:

- 1) Assess for risk of suicide or harm;
- 2) Listen without judgment;
- 3) Give reassurance and information;
- 4) Encourage appropriate professional help;
- 5) Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

These actions improve people's mental health, increase understanding of mental health issues and treatments, connect more people with care, and reduce stigma.

"Many people with mental illness are reluctant to seek help or know where to turn for care, while their friends and family members may struggle to know when and how to help," said Dr. Rotenberg. "Mental Health First Aid teaches people how to begin a conversation with someone who appears to be facing a mental health or substance abuse use issue and, most importantly, in a non-judgmental way provide

support and encouragement so they can get the assistance they need.”

Mental Health First Aid is a public education and prevention tool that is available to adults of all ages at all stages in life. With the restrictions of COVID-19, trainings have gone virtual. Recently, participants from Bethesda Nursing School, AmeriCorps Volunteers, Career Source of Palm Beach County, Keiser University, The Breakers Hotel, Palm Beach County Bar Association, and Alpert JFS staff and supporters completed the program online. They join a network of more than two million individuals nationally who have made the commitment to be the difference in the lives of friends, family, neighbors, colleagues and the public.

“I am proud to say that Alpert JFS is the hub for MHFA training in Palm Beach County, and delighted to share that I have personally taught more than 130 classes with approximately 3,700 participants,” said Wides. “Among the skills taught to participants are how to be a reassuring presence, rather than giving advice, which allows the person having a challenge to trust the person offering guidance.”

Wides was recently honored with a Champion Award from The Palm Beach County Behavioral Health Coalition (PBCBHC). She was also presented with a Community Voices Award for Delivery of Exemplary Community Education from The Palm Beach County Action Alliance for Mental Health in 2018.

The testimonials from program participants speak for themselves:

As a local Bar Association participant stated, “The online course materials were excellent, and provided a strong foundation for the engaging and highly interactive virtual training session that followed. I believe that this important course has provided me with the tools, resources, and confidence that I will need to provide initial help to someone experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge.”

A university student shared, “The day after I completed the training, my usually reliable friend didn’t come to church services, which was out of character. My roommate and I were concerned because we knew she was struggling with depression and anxiety, so we texted her. She responded that she was having a really bad time and had decide to stay home. It was a red flag, so we left early and went to see her. As soon as we walked into her apartment, the action plan I had learned in the training clicked in. She is working with a counselor and doing much better now. She still has her ups and downs, but when I see her, she seems to be dealing well with her challenges. I’m not sure how differently things would have gone if I hadn’t had a plan to follow in that situation...but thanks to my Mental Health First Aid training, I didn’t have to find out.”

A police lieutenant said, “I wish that every corrections officer could receive mental health first aid training. I believe that our corrections system would be better because of it; the inmates would benefit, the officers would benefit and, ultimately, our communities would benefit.”

A corporate CEO stated, “What struck me most about Mental Health First Aid is the interest it generates among people who don’t have a direct connection to the mental health field. This is a program that can move us beyond usual constituencies to truly build a health community.”

Someone from a faith-based organization expressed, *“The situation involved a 24-year-old combat veteran suffering from PTSD, TBI and myriad other issues. He said he had not slept in five days because the voices in his head were so loud. At first, the voices would tell him to hurt himself, and now they were telling him to kill himself. I asked him several times, ‘How can I help you?’ and told him ‘please let me help you.’ He replied that he did not think anything could help him. I asked him directly, ‘Are you thinking about suicide?’ He said he probably would be better off. Then I asked ‘What would you like to do?’ and ‘What do you think you need to do?’ After a long pause he said, ‘One of the voices in my head is telling me to check myself into the psychiatric unit at the VA Hospital.’ I repeated what he said, and he said again that he would like to get some help. Later, the young man called to let me know that he had arrived at the hospital and was checking himself in, and I was able to tell him how proud I was of him for getting the help he needed.”*

Continuing Education Units (CEUs), including Continued Legal Education credit, are available for Mental Health First Aid Training. To find out how you can participate in a training and to be certified, phone 561-238-0251 or email Cindy.Wides@AlpertJFS.org.

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