

Youth Mental Health in Mendocino County
By Natasha Carter

Healthy Mendocino Editor's Note: Mental health issues can be a concern for everyone from children to adults. This month learn how mental health challenges can impact students in Mendocino County and how public education about mental health issues can make a difference in the lives of children and youth.

1 in 5 children suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder, but approximately 75% do not receive treatment. This can be due to several factors including children not being identified early as needing services, financial barriers and lack of access to treatment, and fear of stigma and discrimination. This has a huge impact on a student's academic success as mental health issues, if untreated, significantly impedes learning. In September 2014, Mendocino County Office of Education (MCOE) received two grants to address and support mental health wellness for youth and students in Mendocino County.

The Project Aware Grant through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) aims to promote mental health literacy, awareness and reduce stigma and discrimination through Mental Health and Youth Mental Health First Aid trainings. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is a public education program that has an adult and a youth curriculum. Adult Mental Health First Aid introduces participants to risk factors and warning signs of mental illnesses, builds understanding of their impact, and provides an overview of common supports. Youth Mental Health First Aid is primarily designed for adults who regularly interact with young people. Just like medical first aid, MHFA is not about treatment and diagnoses, but about offering assistance and support to people suffering from mental health distress or crisis until professional help can be attained.

The course introduces common mental health challenges for youth, reviews typical adolescent development, and teaches a 5-step action plan for how to help young people in both crisis and non-crisis situations. This 8-hour course uses role-playing and simulations to demonstrate how to offer initial help in a mental health crisis and connect persons to the appropriate professional, peer, social, and self-help care. Mental Health First Aid is included on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

Under the Project Aware grant, MCOE's Mental Health in Education Project will train 6 Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) instructors who will then help MCOE train at least 250 school and community members in Mental Health First Aid in the 2-year grant period. Even though MCOE's focus is on the students and school personnel in Mendocino County, the Mental Health First Aid program is targeted towards a broader base of community members who have had little or no professional mental health training. This can include health workers, law enforcement, first aid responders, library staff etc.

In addition to students, the Mental Health in Education project also hopes to reach underserved populations such as Latinos and Native Americans, as well as those living in remote and isolated pockets of the county where access to mental health services is limited. For more information about the Project Aware grant and MHFA trainings or to specifically request MHFA trainings for your organization, please contact Student Mental Health Coordinator Natasha Carter at 467-5111 or ncarter@mcoe.us.

The second grant MCOE received is the School Climate Transformation Grant through the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities National Programs. The School Climate Transformation grant will assist and support schools and school districts in establishing and implementing a multi-tier Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework on school campuses. PBIS aims to teach behavioral expectations to students in the same manner as any core curriculum subject and instill a systemic positive culture across school campuses. The goal of this 5-year grant is to reduce the number of discipline referrals, suspensions, expulsions, truancy and drop-out rates, as well as create supportive school climates that are conducive to students' academic success. Both grant projects will be administered in a complementary fashion to promote and support mental health wellness for Mendocino County students.

Often, people are more willing to assist someone who appears to have a physical injury, but less likely to help someone with a mental health issue. This can be due to a lack of knowledge or understanding, not knowing how to help, and not knowing what the available community resources are. The Mental Health First Aid trainings are therefore a great resource for the community, and will provide the skills and tools necessary to assist someone, youth or adult, undergoing mental or emotional distress. As with many other issues, early intervention is key to recovery. For more information on mental health in Mendocino County visit www.healthymendocino.org.

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