

Mental Health First Aid Collaborative in Jacksonville, FL

The Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Collaborative in Jacksonville, FL grew out of findings from a 2016 community health needs assessment (CHNA). The key finding was around mental health access and population trends, indicating that it takes 14–30 days to get access to mental health resources, and that the suicide rate was on the rise in 4 of the 5 counties in the Northeast Florida area. It was clear that mental health needed to be a priority. After this need was identified, the hospital collaborative, which was started in 2012 to conduct CHNAs, decided to work together to bring MHFA training to the area. The focus of this training effort was to make a positive impact in the community by increasing awareness of mental health issues, intervening with people in a mental health crisis, and educating lay persons about mental health resources available in the community.

The hospital collaborative in our area consists of 5 non-profit hospitals. After hearing about the CHNA results, the CEOs of each hospital publicly voiced their commitment to mental health and pledged to contribute funding to the MHFA initiative. City leadership was supportive of the initiative as well, bringing law enforcement and first responders into the training effort. The ultimate goal was to train 10,000 Jacksonville area citizens in four years.

To do this, the hospitals collectively funded two “train the trainer” sessions in Jacksonville, which resulted in 60 certified instructors who each made a commitment to train at least 100 people over the next three years. The hospitals pay trainers for their time, buy the training manuals for participants, and offer the courses free of charge. Due to the size of this venture, the hospital collaborative hired the Health Planning Council of Northeast Florida (HPCNEF) to manage the effort. HPCNEF helps the collaborative set collective targets for training and coordinates the efforts of the various stakeholders in meeting those targets.

MHFA was created in Australia in 2001 by Betty Kitchener, a nurse specializing in health education, and Tony Jorm, a respected mental health literacy professor. Mental Health First Aid is an 8-hour course that gives people the skills to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The evidence behind the program demonstrates that it does build mental health literacy, helping the public identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness.

Just as CPR training helps a person with no clinical training assist an individual following a heart attack, MHFA training helps a person assist someone experiencing a mental health crisis such as contemplating suicide. In both situations, the goal is to help support an individual *until appropriate professional help* arrives. Mental Health First Aiders learn a single 5-step strategy that includes assessing risk, respectfully listening to and supporting the individual in crisis, and identifying appropriate professional help and other supports. Participants are also introduced to risk factors and warning signs for mental health or substance use problems, engage in experiential activities that build understanding of the impact of illness on individuals and families, and learn about evidence-supported treatment and self-help strategies.