

Youth Mental Health First Aid: Implementation Lessons from Pennsylvania

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Located in the western suburbs of Philadelphia, Coatesville is one of Pennsylvania's poorest communities. In the fall of 2013, the Brandywine Health Foundation and key area leaders learned from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey about the high rates of depression among Coatesville-area youth compared with youth in the remainder of Chester County and the state as a whole. In addition, children in the Coatesville Area School District (CASD) were disproportionately affected by neglect, abuse, delinquency issues, and low graduation rates.

These statistics demonstrated not only the need for a strong behavioral health system of care, but also the critical importance of prevention and early intervention for the ongoing success of Coatesville youth. Already the funder of two key behavioral health agencies, the Brandywine Health Foundation decided to further prioritize behavioral health issues in Coatesville and turned to colleagues at the Thomas Scattergood Behavioral Health Foundation in Philadelphia for ideas and evidence-based practices. After several meetings, the Brandywine Health Foundation's staff and board of directors decided to move forward with a plan to bring the Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) curriculum to Coatesville.

YMHFA teaches the knowledge and skills needed to identify, understand, and respond to signs and symptoms of behavioral health challenges or crises. The curriculum provides an overview of the signs and symptoms of various behavioral health challenges such as depression, anxiety, suicide, and substance-use disorders. The course content also teaches a five-step action plan using the mnemonic "ALGEE," which stands for: **A**ssess for risk of suicide or harm, **L**isten nonjudgmentally, **G**ive reassurance and information, **E**ncourage appropriate professional help, and **E**ncourage self-help and other support strategies. ALGEE is the cornerstone of the curriculum.

During the first year, 303 people went through the eight-hour training session on the National Council for Behavioral Health curriculum. Fifty-four percent of the Coatesville-area participants were school district employees, including cafeteria workers, custodians, and secretarial staff, while the remainder were interested citizens. Several stories have already emerged of the positive impact of the training. For example, counselors at the coed after-school homework program called *Backing Our Young Sons & Giving Girls Guidance* have twice intervened after hearing youth discussing suicide. So have five cafeteria workers at the North Brandywine Middle School after noticing that a student appeared withdrawn and isolated. A year ago the cafeteria workers may not have known what to do, but having learned warning signs and proper assessment at the training session, they promptly referred the student to appropriate personnel to receive help.

A major advantage of bringing YMHFA to Coatesville was being able to learn from other Philadelphia-area communities and to create an informal regional learning lab. A summary of key learnings and tips for implementing YMHFA include:

- 1) **It takes a village! The *Collective Impact Model* can be a helpful organizational tool.**
 - Identify a trusted backbone organization with dedicated staff time that is responsible for logistics and execution.
 - Create a common agenda for all partners with shared measurements for success.

Participant Comments

"I was very impressed because of the very realistic goals they set: opening up human contact with troubled people and giving them someone to speak with."

"It's basic mental health first aid or CPR that gives the general public tools to respond if they see someone in an acute crisis."

"Such a stigma surrounds mental health issues that people often are reluctant to talk about them... this training empowers laypeople to know the signs and symptoms of a mental health crisis, then to act by knowing where to send those in need for help"

- Ensure continuous communication across all partners.
 - Identify working groups to address different portions of the implementation process, and have these working groups meet about every six to eight weeks.
- 2) **Include member(s) of the school district’s executive leadership team in the planning process.**
- Solicit the Superintendent’s support; it goes a long way.
 - If possible, have the Director of Student Services, the Director of Health Services, or the Assistant Superintendent participate in planning meetings, attend training as a participant, and/or become a trainer.
 - Start each training with a “welcome and thank you” from a member of the school district’s executive leadership team.
 - Provide continuing education credits when possible.
- 3) **Technical assistance is a vital part of the process.**
- Reach out to the National Council for Behavioral Health and other YMHFA providers with questions or concerns about your implementation plan.
 - Don’t hesitate to ask questions about timelines, trainers, age requirements, and evaluation tools, even though the curriculum and delivery pathways are standardized and vetted.
- 4) **Do an evaluation.**
- Understand that although evaluations can be costly and time consuming, they provide additional feedback for the trainers, all partners, and the National Council for Behavioral Health.
 - Recognize that participants feel valued for being asked to participate in the evaluation.
 - Look at an evaluation as an opportunity for press coverage and publications.
- 5) **Start with the champions.**
- Identify the leaders within the staff who will get others excited about participating, and train them first.
 - Strategize about which staff members have the most opportunity for change or contact with students.
 - Think beyond teachers and classroom professionals to nutrition services, custodial staff, bus drivers, coaches, etc.
- 6) **Approach other funders for support.**
- Realize that there will be unplanned costs related to providing YMHFA with fidelity.
 - Provide meals and/or snacks as a way to encourage participation.

NEXT STEPS

Though the Brandywine Health Foundation and its partners were confident that bringing YMHFA to Coatesville would have a significant impact, the group was committed to having an independent evaluation of the program. Results from pre- and post-training surveys developed and analyzed by West Chester University show the training significantly raises awareness about the proper way to respond to youth, and the confidence to do so. The most dramatic improvements included:

- the percentage of trainees who believe “You should ask a youth who tells you they are thinking about suicide whether they have a plan to do so” increased from 47 percent to 93 percent; and
- the percentage of trainees who said it is false that “You should not ask someone if they are feeling suicidal in case you put the idea in their head” rose from 60 to 88 percent.

Training and evaluation will continue in the CASD for three more years, with hundreds more to be trained and study results that can hopefully be used nationwide to ensure that young people are being helped before it’s too late. The program has already garnered national attention resulting in a two-year federal grant to the CASD, one of just 105 U.S. school districts to receive such recognition. The Coatesville YMHFA initiative team has had the opportunity to share this work at conferences held by a number of organizations, including the National Council for Behavioral Health, Penn State Public Health Symposium, American Public Health Association, Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration, and Grantmakers In Health’s annual conference in March.

The program’s success was made possible because of the remarkable generosity of the funding collaborative, which includes: Applestone Foundation; Coatesville Community Health Foundation, a fund of the Chester County Community Foundation; County of Chester Department of Human Services; First Hospital Foundation; Gunard Berry Carlson Memorial Foundation Inc.; The Rotary Club of Coatesville; the Thomas Scattergood Behavioral Health Foundation; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; United Way of Chester County; van Ameringen Foundation Inc.; The Dansko Foundation, and an anonymous donor.

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SOURCES

Brandywine Health Foundation’s YMHFA Year One Report *First Year Report, August 2014 – June 2015*, by West Chester University.

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