



Schools to get training in Mental Health First Aid



PHOTO COURTESY TPARADIS/PIXABAY

New Jersey is allocating \$6 million to help train teachers to recognize when students may be experiencing a mental health crisis, and how to help.

By ERIN ROLL

roll@montclairlocal.news

On Feb. 11, Gov. Phil Murphy announced that the state will set aside \$6 million to fund teachers from public, private schools, colleges and universities to undergo training to become Mental Health First Aid instructors.

Mental Health First Aid was created in 2001 by Betty Kitchener, a nurse specializing in health education, and Anthony Jorm, a mental health literacy professor.

Mental Health First Aid is a national program presented by the National Council for Behavioral Health. As of 2020, an estimated two million people nationwide have participated in training sessions, according to Mental Health First Aid's website.

The program was created with the realization that most people know what to do when someone is having a heart attack by calling 9-1-1, but most don't know what to do when someone is experiencing a mental health crisis.

"Early recognition of a student's mental health issues leads to earlier interventions which in the end leads to more effective and positive outcomes. When it comes to students thinking about suicide, teachers certified in MHFA can play a critical role in connecting these students to needed mental health supports and services. This saves lives," said Marvin Gorsky, Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris senior director of clinical services.

The funds allow for at least one staffer of each school district to attend a training session, hosted by the New Jersey Department of Human Services, to become a Mental Health First Aid instructor. The training sessions will cover warning signs of youth mental health issues, and how to connect students with the appropriate resources and support systems. Those staffers will then return to their schools and districts to work with other staff and students.

Students' mental health can be an overlooked and neglected component of a child's growth, said Education Commissioner Lamont O. Repollet. "Our plan is to create a roadmap that school districts and parents can use to provide children with the behavioral and mental health supports they need."

Gabe Zimmerman, a Montclair High School graduate, supports the ongoing mental health training program.

Gabe's brother Jared, a 2015 graduate of Montclair High School, died in 2016. He had been dealing with ongoing mental health issues at the time of his death. At the time, Jared was a student at Bard College in New York.

His parents and siblings established Jared's Fund in 2019 in his memory. Through an ongoing fellowship program, the fund provides money for students who want to work on projects related to mental health.

Last summer, the students participating in the fellowship program attended Mental Health First Aid workshops being offered by the New York City Department of Health, Zimmerman said. While a lot has been done to help

raise awareness about mental health among teens, Gabe Zimmerman said a lot more work remains to be done.

“I think what we’re doing is really important, but it’s a drop in the bucket,” Gabe Zimmerman said. “There’s so much work to be done.”

Attendees may take eight-hour, full-day sessions, or two half-day sessions geared toward specific populations young people ages 12 to 18.

Workshops are also open to police officers, EMTs and other first responders.

The workshops train people, not trained mental health professionals, recognize when someone around them may be experiencing anxiety, depression, a psychosis or potentially be at risk of suicide, and learn how to help that person until they can speak to a mental health professional.

“Our mental health is just as important as our physical health, but as a society we are often unfamiliar with the signs and symptoms of mental illness,” said Gov. Phil Murphy. “With improved training for school and higher education personnel and better opportunities for school and provider connections, we can better address and support the mental health needs of our young people. We are committed to ensuring that our residents have access to the resources they need to thrive and succeed in life.”