



Mental Health First Aid: A ‘Radical Efficiency’ in Health Promotion

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As states continue to suffer the residual effects of the greatest recession of our generation and the resulting deep cuts to human services, we are all looking for ways to do more with less. The search for population-based health interventions that “different, better, and cheaper” has become the new mantra, not only in the United States but around the world.

When the budget ax recently fell on public services in England, the concept of “radical efficiency” started to gain traction. “Radical efficiencies,” modeled in a new report by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, call for transforming the public’s experience of services they receive. The idea is not merely to tweak existing services, but to generate new perspectives on old problems to ensure a genuine shift in the nature and efficiency of the services.

The perfect example of a “radical efficiency” here in the United States is our Mental Health First Aid USA public education program. The 12-hour course is designed to give ordinary people the skills to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or who is experiencing a mental health crisis.



A tenet of the course is that early intervention prevents mental illness from becoming more severe. The course is not so much about prevention as it is about preventing escalation. Participants learn communication skills and gain knowledge about referrals to help people at onset or in crisis.

As we all know far too well, anyone, anywhere can experience mental illness or encounter others who are having problems. Mental Health First Aid owes much of its success to the fact that it is capable of working and spreading effectively throughout society.

Some of Mental Health First Aid's many benefits are that the program is self-perpetuating and self-sustaining. Certified instructors become program ambassadors and train the public in their communities, while maintaining fidelity to the national program and receiving ongoing technical and marketing assistance. Primary support comes through people paying to participate in the 5-day Mental Health First Aid instructor certification course. Once qualified, an instructor can choose to charge people to participate in a Mental Health First Aid course or offer it for free. The savings come from people seeking help early in their illness, reducing the severity of their condition, and the long-term burden to the health system.

Mental Health First Aid has been immensely successful in communities and organizations that have embraced it. Having finished the training at a mental health center in Kansas, a participant remarked, "You know, I have been working in long-term care for over 20 years and I have attended a lot of workshops. Usually, they spend most of the time talking about depression, schizophrenia, or whatever and then spend next to no time on what to do about it. This class has told me what to do."

Similar case histories from across the country have proven that Mental Health First Aid is a win-win proposition. The High Plains Mental Health Center in Hays, Kansas, has already completed 10 full trainings since 2009 with an average class attendance of 30 people.

"The numbers are not the only measure of success, however; these participants are enthusiastic and thoughtful and become our best source of advertising," says Ken Loos, a Mental Health First Aid instructor and the High Plains Mental Health Center's manager of community prevention, education, and outreach. "They tell their friends and neighbors, but they also tell colleagues in other communities."

Loos says that while participants have raved about the content of Mental Health First Aid, the largest benefit has been the reduction in the stigma of mental illness.

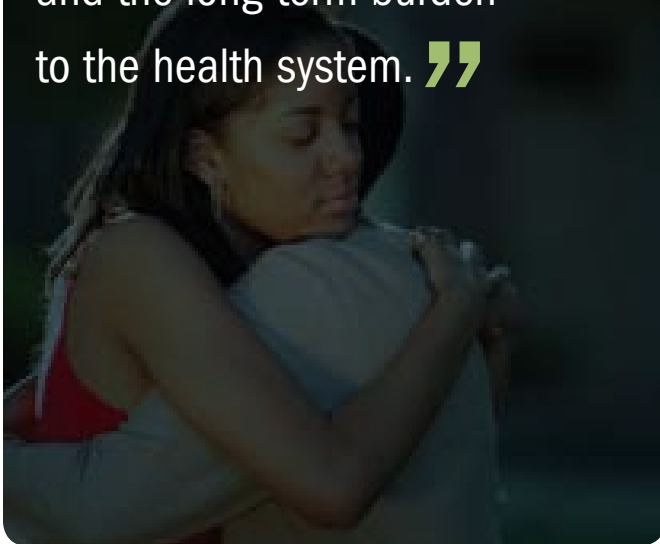
"At the beginning of each training, I inform participants that the material is inherently difficult to think about for people who have been personally affected by depression and suicide," he says. "I remind them of the suffering caused by mental illness for both the client and his or her family. Without exception, I have seen participants in each presentation become emotional; sometimes they even leave for short periods of time, but so far, they have always returned."

Radical Efficiencies and Healthcare

Five medical conditions – heart conditions, cancer, trauma-related disorders, mental disorders and asthma – were ranked highest in terms of direct medical spending in the U.S. in 1996 and 2006, according to the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Mental illness, including suicide, accounts for more than 15 percent of the burden of disease in established market economies. This is more than the disease burden caused by all cancers. Yet, it is only recently that healthcare systems have focused on the mind-body connection. However, the National Council has led the bidirectional care conversation for more than 10 years. We've known that by providing comprehensive healthcare to all in need, we can help lower skyrocketing costs by intervening early in the illness process. In this issue of *National Council Magazine*, we spotlight healthcare "radical efficiencies" – in locating, staffing, and delivering primary care, mental health and addictions treatment services; in the measurement of outcomes; and in health promotion, prevention, and early intervention. We commend the outstanding work already done by pioneering organizations and remain committed to helping further the bidirectional care agenda in a post-healthcare reform world.



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Results have been just as promising at LifeWays in Jackson, Michigan. The organization offered its first class for free. After it filled in less than 10 days, they quickly scheduled three additional trainings for a fee and booked nearly every seat. In the last eight months they have already delivered Mental Health First Aid to almost 100 people.

“It never ceases to amaze me when someone who took the course stops me and says, ‘I used what I learned in Mental Health First Aid last week,’ says Heather Bridgewater, public relations and marketing manager at LifeWays. “Mental Health First Aid is a tool we can all use to break down the stigma surrounding mental illness and empower people with the skills to help someone when they need it most.”

In Fayetteville, North Carolina, the North Carolina Evidence-Based Practices Center has offered the course to a variety of audiences including county health and social service agencies, police departments, the military, hospitals, private agencies, and even school districts. Robert Wilson says every training so far has been filled to capacity. On account of recent headlines and proximity to Fort

Bragg — home of the U.S. Army’s 82nd Airborne and Special Operations — local interest began soon after the Center advertised Mental Health First Aid training in April 2010. Media coverage was followed by recognition at the Fayetteville City Council meeting, where May 17 was proclaimed as Mental Health First Aid Day in the city.

Kimberly Holm and Leslie Kveene at Woodland Centers, a Community Mental Health Center in Minnesota, say their administration has encouraged them to train as many groups as possible in their rural community. They’ve offered seven courses in 2010 and trained clergy, law enforcement officers, school workers (principals, social workers, and teachers), county social workers, probation officers, tribal social workers, administrative assistants, chemical dependency students, nurses, family members, dental professionals, a doctor, and a college professor. Word of mouth has been the most successful form of marketing. Woodlands is also training all support staff — in billing, medical records, reception, maintenance, transcription — in Mental Health First Aid.

Mental Health First Aid may also be viewed as a “radical efficiency” in promoting mental health literacy, giving participants the capacity to obtain, process, and understand the health information and services needed to make appropriate decisions. The training directly supports the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ general health literacy campaign. The National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy’s guiding principles state that everyone has the right to health information to help them make informed decisions, and that health services should be delivered in ways that are understandable and beneficial to health, longevity, and quality of life.

As we continue to find creative solutions to do more with less, perhaps a little radical thinking about “radical efficiencies” is in order. Mental Health First Aid should be top of mind. The training’s overwhelming success and proven cost savings is a “radical efficiency” that truly fits the bill of a service that is different, better, and cheaper.

Linda Rosenberg is an expert in mental health policy and practice with 30+ years of experience in the design, financing, and management of psychiatric treatment and rehabilitation programs. Under Rosenberg’s leadership since 2004, the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare has more than doubled its membership; helped to secure the passage of the federal mental health and addiction parity law; expanded financing for integrated behavioral health/primary care services; was instrumental in bringing behavioral health to the table in federal healthcare reform dialogue and initiatives; and played a key role in introducing the Mental Health First Aid public education program in the United States. Before joining the National Council, Rosenberg served as the senior deputy commissioner for the New York State Office of Mental Health.

Meena Dayak has more than 15 years of experience in marketing and media relations for nonprofit healthcare organizations. She spearheads branding, public relations, social media, member communication, and public education initiatives — including Mental Health First Aid — at the National Council and serves as editor-in-chief of National Council Magazine. Her mission is to help member organizations tell a compelling story so the world will recognize that mental illnesses and addictions are treatable health conditions from which people can recover and lead full lives.