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Mental Health First Aid initiative, which trained 3,398 people in 2017, will continue in 2018



Susan Salahshor, a physician's assistant at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville and president of the Florida Academy of Physician Assistants, is a facilitator for the Mental Health First Aid initiative, a coalition of five Jacksonville hospitals who launched a campaign last January to provide free adult mental health first aid training. During 2017 the initiative trained 3,398 people. (Photo provided by the Mayo Clinic)

Sometimes ambitious initiatives are introduced with some fanfare only to quietly vanish.

That didn't happen with the Mental Health First Aid initiative announced last January, said Susan Salahshor, a physician's assistant at Mayo Clinic and president of the Florida Academy of Physician Assistants, who is one of the facilitators trained to help people understand mental illness and how to deal with it.

The coalition of five local hospital systems —

Baptist Health, Brooks Rehabilitation, the Mayo Clinic, St. Vincent's HealthCare and UF Health Jacksonville — that created an eight-hour course designed to train people to perform “adult mental health first aid” set a goal of training 3,333 people in 2017. In fact, a total of 3,398 people got the training last year.

Salahshor not only served as a facilitator for eight classes led by a team of four mental health advocates from Mayo Clinic, she also facilitated a class for faculty members at Florida State University where she is an assistant professor in the FSU College of Medicine School of Physician Assistant Practice.

She also secured a \$10,000 grant to underwrite the teaching of the course to students studying to become physician assistants. That program will start with a class at Nova Southeastern University's Jacksonville campus.

When the Mental Health First Aid initiative was announced, the goal was to train 10,000 people. So efforts will be ongoing over the next couple of years, Salahshor said.

The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, which trained about 700 officers last year, has pledged to eventually train all 3,000 officers. The city of Jacksonville has also pledged to train every employee, Salahshor said.

The need for such training was made apparent by a 2014 Jacksonville Community Council Inc. study that found about 250,000 people in Jacksonville and Yulee had mental health issues but only 41 percent were seeking treatment.

During the class, facilitators emphasize five key things someone providing mental health first aid must do: Assess the risk of suicide or other harmful behavior; listen non-judgmentally; give reassurance that things can get better; encourage people to seek appropriate mental health help; and encourage people to find ways to self-help and seek support strategies.

“Mental health first aid is like CPR,” Salahshor said. “We're showing people how to recognize that somebody is experiencing a mental health crisis. My role as a facilitator is to help people recognize the condition and find out how to deal with it.”

Salahshor said that while she began her work as a facilitator with the knowledge that “there are not enough mental health resources” in Northeast Florida, what she discovered is that even the resources that do exist are being underutilized, in part because people don’t know they exist.

A major goal of the training is to get people to fully comprehend that mental health issues are just as real as physical health issues.

“We’re removing the stigma,” she said. “Severe schizophrenia is just as disabling as dementia.”

She said one woman who came to a class was frustrated because her daughter was struggling with bipolar illness. After the class, the woman told Salahshor that she realized her approach — telling her daughter to “snap out of it” — had been counterproductive.

Last year the Mayo team, which trained 472 people, realized that people were having to use vacation time to take the eight-hour course on weekdays. So they offered three Saturday classes. This year they are increasing that to six Saturday classes, Salahshor said.

“The more people that become mental health first aiders, the quicker we remove the stigma and the more likely we get them the right treatment to lead satisfying lives,” Salahshor said.

To find a class to attend, go to jaxmentalhealth.org (<https://jaxmentalhealth.org/>).

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